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MARCH

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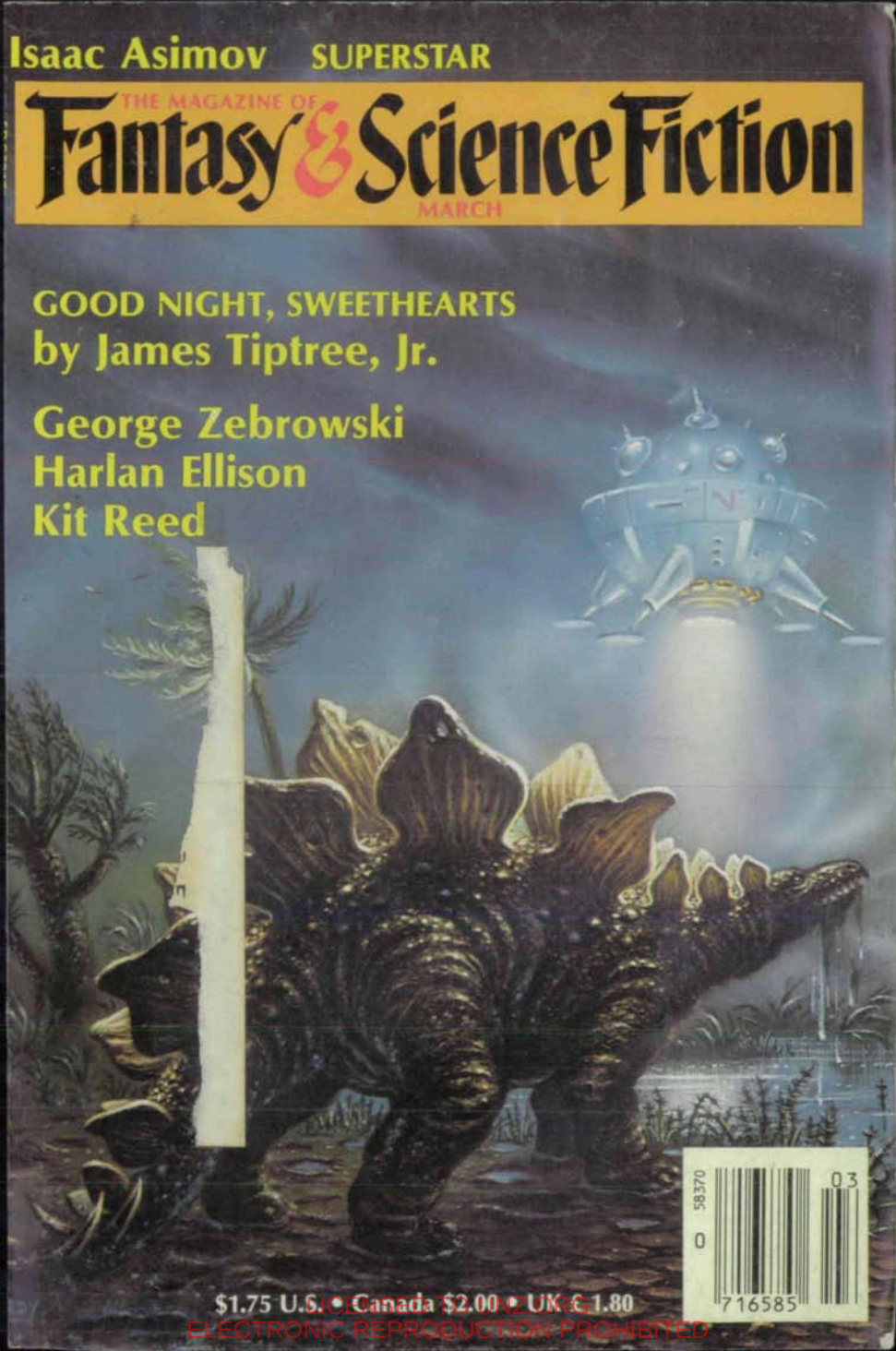

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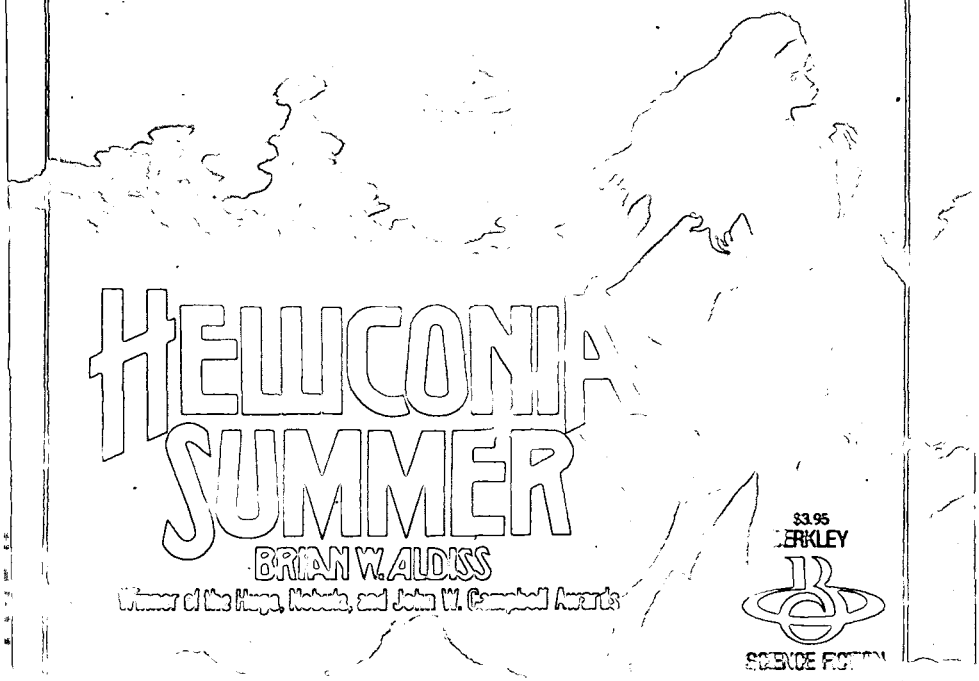

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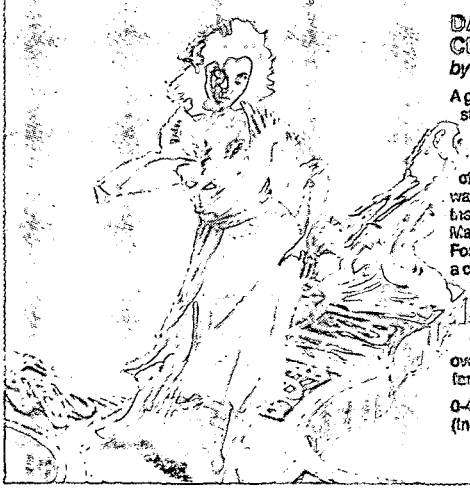

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This story is about the pilot of a rescue and salvage ship, who answers a distress call at the edge of the Great North Rift and stirs up some old memories. It shares the same setting as "The Only Neat Thing To Do," (October 1985); both stories will be published (along with additional material) as a TOR hardcover in July 1986.

Good Night, Sweethearts

BY

JAMES TIPTREE, JR.

BLAT-BLAT-BLAT BEEEP BLAT—

Far, far out, where Raven lies dreamless in his cold-chest, as near to death as living man may come, a hypo-needle jabs him in his unconscious arse. Then, gently, the chest tumbles him out onto its padding. Raven sits up, the last films of cold-sleep draining quickly from his mind.

How long is it since he left FedBase 900?

His panel tells him that while he was in cold-sleep, *Blackbird,* his salvage tug-ship, has carried him the long trip out to Rift-edge, and taken up her precomputed patrol toward the five colony planets that are newly on her holocharts, in the fringes of the Rift.

The *BLAT-BEEP* turns out to be two signals.

One is a loud Out-Of-Fuel call from an unknown ship.

The other is FedBase 900, almost beyond useful commo range out here. Raven tunes down the O.O.F. to catch the whispery voice.

"—It's all yours, *Blackbird,"* says FedBase through the space jazz. "If they're not an ell-dee, tell 'em we can't make it under thirty days. Good pickings!"

"Right. Thanks." Raven signs off, wondering what "pickings" they expect from an Out-Of-Fuel call. Somebody really has a loud ship, though.

When Raven figures the distance to the calling ship, he sees it isn't worth going back into cold-sleep for. Good. He can use some time checking where to refuel *Blackbird* after he's filled up the dry ship's tanks.

Too bad he hasn't also a wreck to work on and restore, as he often does. "Raven's Wrecks" are well known and sought after.

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The nearest fuel depot turns out to be one of those new colony planets; it's now called Cambria. There's a scrawled notation that FedBase 900 lost contact with Cambria about a hundred days ago. That could mean anything or nothing. Colonists are notoriously poor on commo equipment maintenance.

On the other hand, last time Raven has three times been awakened by vanishers, which could mean that a nest of Black Worlders or trash-heads left over from the great Rare Asteroid Rush, or lords knew what, are operating in his sector. They won't have meddled with the fuel dump, though, Raven decides; the Federation's explosive tamper-proofing is widely respected.

But colonies are innocent and vulnerable, and overly preoccupied with planting and irrigating and drainage and climate and domesticating local fauna — until somebody lands and surprises them. Human renegades can also be bad news for a sleeping man in a ship, but Raven's special alarm programs protect him there. He has twice had the pleasure of grappling, sealing, and delivering to FedBase a shipload of pirates out to take him.

Thinking of this, he grins and throws back his shock of dark hair and turns up the g's for a few warm-up exercises to subdue the rich diet he ate at his birthday celebration on FedBase 900. He isn't stiff from cold-sleep — cold sleep doesn't make you stiff, or anything else. In fact, absolutely nothing goes on, biologically speaking, in that chest in which he's spent, now, close to seven decades. You don't age. You don't even rest —if you go down tired, you wake up tired too, which is why Raven always has a nap before he goes under.

He catches his toes under the chest to do some sit-ups, thinking, *seventy standard years.* And thirty more awake; it was his hundredth birthday, by the little Terra-Timer on the corner of his panel — one of Humanitys's last links with the planet that bore it — that he was celebrating at FedBase 900. And yet he's a young man, with the bounce and the bones and the unwrinkled hide of a man of thirty. Living years, that is.

He knows this disconcerts some people. Back at FedBase, where he is something of a historical celebrity, he was aware of an occasional curious, troubled look. This usually happened when he forgot and spoke of the Last War as if it had ended the day before yesterday, which, to him, it had. And after that there are the blank years in his mind, which represent the stretch in Compassionate Rehab they'd put him through.

Rehab had been the Federation's answer to war memories too traumatic to live with. Raven appreciates this. He's careful not to try any deep remembering; he gave away the medal somebody awarded him for the gods knew what. And he's always been

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very wary about mixing with people or places that give him strange cold little pricklings of déjà vu.

Hence he took up his excellent trade of Salvage and Rescue, out here in the high and hairy, where the northern edge of Federation Space frays into the Rift and the times and distances between jobs are very great. The Patrol is delighted to have him here; Raven and his tough little high-thrust, versatile grappler-tug are known as the pair that can be relied on to cope with anything copable, and some that aren't. The credits he accrues usually go into newer, fancier hard- and software for *Blackbird*. And out here he is in no danger — particularly now — of running into anything that will undo Rehab's work.

Business had fallen off after the great Rare Rock Rush, as expected. But Sector 900 still attracts enough misjumpers and O.O.F.s and would-be explorers in busted colony-ships, and active idiots who can manage to hit the only other ship or rock in a cubic light year, to keep Raven nicely supplied with excess credits.

A good life, Raven thinks, snapping back his exerciser grips, a very good life. And a great birthday party, too. He's made a lot of new friends; they may be gray-haired when he sees them next, but he's used to that. In fact he likes everything just as it is, for him.

His mass-proximity indicator chimes: the calling ship is in scope range.

The "pickings" joke is clear at once: she is a whopping private luxury yacht, bearing among her golden scrollwork the name MIRA II. Raven checks her over visually with care. No sign of anything amiss, save that she's dead in space. Some power left — lights show inside. He then tries out his most recent extravagance, a Janes' program, and finds that the owner of *Mira II* is one Myr-and-Ser Pavel bar Palladine. Looks, sounds, smells rich.

He's all but on her now, using impellor power, and he makes one slow pass around her gold-tinted ports. There's an orange-clad man apparently asleep in the pilot's couch, and a girl's figure in copilot. Back in the lounge area, he can glimpse two or three dim forms in armchairs.

The girl has seen him; she waves languidly.

Raven spots *Mira's* mag grapplers; shortly he has his extension tunnel lapped over their main airlock and is suited up.

By the lock is more gold-work, containing a speaker grille.

"All green! Open up!" he calls. "Your fuel is here."

No reply, no audible action.

He calls again, with no result. What's wrong with them?

Then he sees, of all things, an obvious arrival holocam, also in gold. It looks as if these characters spend most of their time in social ship-hopping. What are they doing out here?

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He punches the holocam with his gloved hand and says formally, "*Mira Two?* Salvage and Rescue Officer Raven here, come to fill up your fuel."

Still no action.

He yells a couple of times less formally. Then he ungloves and whips down his stethoscope, a gadget indispensable for exploring wrecks; the ear-pieces are incorporated in his helmet. Taking care not to touch *Mira's* icy shell with bare skin, he locates two — no, three — voices. They're droning on in unmistakable loud monotones. Not a conversation.

Oh, oh. Talkers.

He puts his steth back up his sleeve, considering. The Talkers' chairs are right by the port, drowning out any noise he can raise. And they sound high as space.

Raven has never tried Talkee, or Taraka-Talaka, to give it its right name; solo spacers take extreme care of their heads. He knows only that Talkee is supposed to make words — any words — indescribably enchanting, sexy, mystic. A few Talkee users just sit and listen to their inner voices. But most of them *talk* — an unstoppable flow of gibberish, with no attention to anything else. And they talk loudly, because Talkee makes you slightly deaf, among other things. Drive you mad to be around one.

Well, the girl looked reasonably alert, and the commo has to be right by her.

Raven ducks back into *Blackbird.* His receiver was tuned down to cut our *Mira's* help call, still blasting away. He turns up the gain, making a face.

"*Mira! Mira Two!* Your fuel is here, I've been banging on your port. Cut off that godlost signal and open up. This is Officer Raven, Salvage and Rescue."

In a minim the signal stops. The speaker gives a soft, female sound between a sigh and a giggle. Then Raven sees *Mira's* port slide silently aside, revealing a mirrored air lock carpeted in cream, with a big gold monogram. Raven glances at his own boots and reluctantly gives them a swipe.

He steps into their lock; the port closes behind him, to the usual accompaniment of a *whuck* in ears and stomach due to gravity change. Their air is quick; in a minim the inner port slides open and Raven is assaulted by the Talkers' loud drones. *Mira* is g'd light, and the spacious lounge is almost unlit, letting the starfields blaze in. A gorgeous hydroponics display of plants lights one side. Dreamy — except for the hoarse, braying voices coming from the huge lounge chairs. Raven makes out the figures of two trim, well-dressed older men, who are Talking, and one much younger, plump — no, frankly fat — man clad in some sort of embroidered robes, who is staring druggishly into space. None of them appear to notice his entry.

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Raven throws back his helmet, getting a breath of deliciously fresh, springlike air, and step-floats forward toward the pilot's area. As he passes beyond the lounge, he brushes through what feels almost like a palpable, cobweb curtain where nothing is — and the noise behind cuts off abruptly. A privacy shield; he hadn't known they were in civilian hands yet. It's a fine relief.

When he reaches the observers' bench behind the pilots' seats, the man he saw asleep is just waking, stretching long, orange-ruffled arms. Raven sees only thick, silvery-gray hair until the man turns to face him, revealing a hawk-sharp countenance with hooded eyes. The effect is of impatience, imperious vigor as yet unweakened by some considerable age.

The girl has turned to watch his approach. Raven can see only a small, pale face under a great cloud of silver-gilt hair. But something about her bothers him immediately. He keeps his eyes strictly off her, addresses himself to the man.

"Myr — ah, Myr-and-Ser bar Palladine?"

"Yes?" The voice is weary, and clearly used to command.

Somehow Raven doesn't see any point in demanding proof that he is *Myra II's* legal owner, or is bar Palladine. Part of his mind reproaches him; it would be easy enough for a gang of Black Worlders to take over *Mira,* drug the occupants, and act out this part, to get fuel. Too farfetched, he tells his mind — and in his experience the Black Worlds don't produce types like these. Still, a little caution wouldn't be amiss.

"I'm Salvage and Rescue Officer Raven. I understand you're out of fuel."

The girl's glittering head nods vigorously; bar Palladine gives a faint scornful grunt.

"Now, before I'll fill her up, if you so decide" — bar Palladine's eyebrows flicker in surprise — "there're a couple of matters to straighten out first. First, the possibility of a leak or a pump malfunction. May I ask did it seem reasonable to you when you ran out, or were you at all surprised by the rate of use?"

Bar Palladine actually seems to give this his attention.

"Reasonable. We refueled last at Base 105."

Raven whistles. "And jumped all the way out here? It's none of my business, but may I inquire why you didn't use the beacon routes?"

A flash of anger on the hawk face, quickly abandoned. "That *is* none of your business. But . . . things have changed . . . more than I estimated, since my time."

"Pavel knew a short cut," the girl says in that seductive, breathy whisper. Not a giggle, no way. Raven can no longer wonder about imposters.

"As you say, very reasonable,"

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Raven agrees. "Now, if I may just exchange place with the young lady, so I can check out a few functions? This is Regulation, by the way; out here they frown on our risking the waste of a milliliter of fuel."

"Go ahead, honey."

The girl rises. But Raven, reluctantly watching her, senses discrepancy; her movement isn't a girl's quick jump-up, it shows a woman's flowing grace. And in the bright pilot light he sees something else — a faint white line — no, several white hairlines, running from her chin up into her hair and down across one shoulder. Almost imperceptible. The scars of some dire accident, he guesses; no cosmetic surgery he knows of. She settles on the bench behind him, a very delicate fragrance wafting to his unwilling nose.

"Do you want me to call off what I'm testing?" he asks bar Palladine.

"No. Just get on with it. I've made myself late."

Behind him the girl gives a disappointed murmur. It comes to Raven, as he sends a reverse bypass around the main fuel pump, that perhaps she also is a pilot, or learning to be one.

He runs carefully down his checklist. *Mira II* is well equipped, including refinements that permit him to blow air through possible leaky hoses, and a reverse pouch for flushing the pumps. But she isn't a new ship.

"Would I be guessing wrong to say that this is one of the first long trips you've made in quite a while?"

"Right." Despite the older man's disclaimer, he's following the procedure closely. The technicalities seem to have soothed him.

"I did some . . . space work toward the end of the Last War," he says in a low voice. Raven restrains himself from turning to look at him; this man has to be a lot older than he'd guessed. A lot.

"Did you serve out in these sectors?" Raven is waiting for the pressure indicator to show movement.

"Nearby. It so happened that I and my friends back there —" his mouth twists wryly, — "my two friends, all experienced the Goulart System. You've heard of it?"

"Seen it. Unbelievable."

They are referring to one of the marvels of Federation Space: a stupendous tight-orbit dance of multicolored suns, that has unexplained subjective effects on the Human psyche.

"Well, in an incautious moment I volunteered to fly us all out for one last, nostalgic look. Glad I did. It — it lived up to memory. Few things do, young man."

Mira's pressure readouts hold unchanging; good. Raven is smiling at himself at that "young man," but sobers — after all, bar Palladine had *lived* all or most of those years, while Raven slept.

"I'm glad," he says sincerely. "Now, everything shows green here. I be-

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lieve we're ready to fill you up. But first there's a business aspect you must know about me."

All reflectiveness from the hawk face.

"Everything I've done so far, including the trip over here, is reimbursed to me by the Federation. But I'm not Patrol, I'm what's called an Assimilated Independent. The 'Officer' title is genuine. There're a number of independents working the frontier sections, some licensed, some not. You're out in the cold, high, empty here, Myr-and-Ser. The Force is spread vacuum-thin. They get around to everything eventually, but it takes time. FedBase 900 — that's this sector — told me to tell you it'd be about thirty standard days before they could get fuel out to you."

"So?" says bar Palladine icily; the girl murmurs disgustedly, "Thirty days!"

"Two points. First, you have only my word for this, or for who I am. Here's some ident. But I'd strongly advise — in fact, I insist, that you try your caller and verify my story. If you can't reach them from here, I want your word that you'll check on it when you get in closer. It'll take me off the hook — if you report a contact like this and it doesn't check out, they come for the imposter with a tractor beam. And it'll keep you from looking a shade — well, naive. I could be filling you with H_2O."

At that, the hooded eyes glint, and bar Palladine gestures the girl to the commo station. As he goes on, Raven can hear her low voice, apparently getting through the static.

"Second, the Force can reach you much earlier if it's a matter of life or death. They'll gear up a *c*-jumper and get right out. But it has to be real; the last false claimer is still in the squadron brig . . . .He cut his girl's neck," Raven adds aside to bar Palladine — but the girl hears, and glances at him with those smoky eyes he doesn't want to meet.

"So — you can get filled up right now by me, if you're willing to pay approximately double FedBase's price. The taxpayer doesn't support me. Mine is eighty per, delivered right now. Or you can wait for FedBase and get it at thirty-nine."

During this long speech, bar Palladine seems at first faintly amused, but as Raven plows doggedly on, a gleam of interest comes into the cold features and once or twice he blinks. Raven guesses the man, by old habit, focuses on any business new to him, and has by now probably figured Raven's annual take, costs, and net worth.

Now bar Palladine glances at the port where *Blackbird's* needle nose can be seen in slight to-and-fro motion, the effect of vibration from *Mira*. "We'll take yours, of course. But my ship has big tanks and I'll need every bit of it to reach home. I certainly don't propose to wait while

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you take that thing back for more to finish the job."

Raven grins. "That thing, as you call it, is a flying fuel depot, Myr-and-Ser. Everything hollow has fuel in it, pressurized. And it's fresh from a top-off at Base. Going to make a great bonfire one day."

"Oh, no," whispers the girl.

"Tell you what: If I fail to top you off complete, everything you get is free. I'll punch print on that."

The older man waves that away. "Good enough. Just get at it."

"Right. I'm going for some tools. Now you two check over that confirmation, remembering that my ident *could* be stolen. So could *Blackbird* too — over my dead body."

He goes jauntily aft to the port, wincing as the Talk hits him.

"...Analog, avatar, ambergris, avalanche, attribute, alcohol, arquebus..." rises from the lounge chair occupied by a thin bald man in a blue lounge suit, echoed by, "...Mirth...earth... girth...worth..." from a chair whose occupant Raven can't see. The robed fat man is still silent. He is much younger, certainly no Last War veteran. Bar Palladine hasn't explained his presence. Curious.

As Raven enters the lock, he catches a gleam of direct vision from the fat face, so brief he may have imagined it. The face is drug-vacant again as the port slides closed.

Back in *Blackbird,* tying on his fueling belt loaded with gauges, wrenches, lubricants, pressure-funnels, he finds himself a trifle shaky. What in the hells is wrong with him? An ordinary fueling job, and a lucrative one? . . . But he knows what it is. That godlost girl. Surely she can't be connected—

Don't think of it.

But she draws his mind like a shining magnet, a magnet whose field is drifting cold wisps across his back and loins . . . a magnet luring him to a vortex where all direction, all reason, will be lost in a hurting chaos of past and present . . . Stop this!

He slaps his helmet hard, and stamps back into *Mira* to inquire whether there's anything special he should know about her tanks.

"No, I don't think so," bar Palladine says. "The combinations." He hands over a slim ivory sliver on a suit hook.

Combination locks on your fuel tanks? Marina life, all right!

"Then I'll just pop out your emergency hatch here." Raven swivels and tips the copilot's couch to reveal a circular crawl-through on the side opposite the main port and *Blackbird.* "It'll save uncoupling. You don't mind a short draft?"

"So long as it's short."

"I never knew that was there!" the girl exclaims.

Raven shakes his head. "*And* it needs grease something fierce." He unhooks a container and starts working on the hatch.

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"I'm going out there!" the girl announces suddenly. "Please, Myr Raven, I won't get in your way, truly." She moves pleasingly to bar Palladine. "Pavel, oh, please — I have cabin fever so badly, so badly — I *need* to be out in space —" The murmur ends in something inaudible to Raven. Bar Palladine looks thunderous, but all he says is, "Wear your tether. And keep it fastened."

"Oh, I will, I will, I promise! Thank you, Pavel dear—" She kisses him lightly behind one ear, and snaps open a privacy-cocoon fastened against the hull at one end of the bench. In an instant she's hidden in it.

Raven is cursing his gods. This is the last thing he wants. He has a wild impulse to pull out of there and leave them dry — thirty days is nothing. . . . But he knows he won't, for two reasons. One is his conscience, and the other comes out of the privacy-cocoon in a kind of suit he's never seen before.

It's a heavy, ultra clear plastic, with glossy silvery designs over strategic spots. As far as he can see, that's all she has on.

"Where's your air?" he blurts.

"Here." Smiling, she taps a tiny canister at her tiny waist.

"That sprays a special strain of oxygenating bacteria under the helmet," bar Palladine explains. "Good for twenty-four hours. Then you refresh the can."

"My, my." Raven knows his voice doesn't sound quite right.

"I won't charge you with her safety, because she's virtually uncontrollable," bar Palladine says. "Let's just say that if she doesn't come back in good shape, you'll have that fire."

"Not to worry too much," Raven tells him. "I've had good friends who got space-happy. . . And I know a few fancy knots," he adds privately to the older man, grinning.

"What did you say?" the girl demands.

"Time to close up and go. Here, let me fasten this." Gloved, helmeted, he secures her tether to his belt, feeling as if her waist might snap, feeling as if he were tying fire to himself. He double-checks her almost invisible helmet clamps against all that hair, which seems to be trying to writhe out.

"Test commo," he says through his suit radio.

"Testing," he hears her say to his ears alone, and then suddenly she sings a bar or two from an old, old song. Raven staggers backward, saves himself on the bench. Her speaker doesn't have the usual tinny sound, but conveys a voice delicate and sweet and rich.

"All right, all right," Raven snaps, and bends to complete unscrewing the energy hatch, cautious because it must have been a long time since the outer bag was used.

The cabin air jolts; outside, the bag snaps open solid and true. No

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leaks he can detect. "Now follow me and do exactly what I do."

He crawls out into the bag, grasping a handhold on one side, and motions her to the other. Then he slides the temporary hatch-cover over the opening from outside; when it's secure, he turns and unzips the bag. Air exits with a whoosh. He reels it in around them one-handed. An awkward job; she helps him timidly. When he has it stowed away in its circular slot, ready for reentry use, he pulls his legs in and lets his mag soles engage. She does the same, but he continues to hang onto a handhold until she is solidly on her feet. Then he rises beside her, with her tether looped under the hold.

They are free, standing among the stars.

It's glorious, the alien sun bright and close enough to touch. He wants to stand there peacefully a minim or two, the mag soles holding him lightly, his soul refreshed by space. But he has — has this ship to fuel. This girl to tend. She's standing very close to him now, looking up. *Stop staring at me, stranger woman.* . . That suit must be warmer than it looks, he observes neutrally. Even more neutrally, he registers that she is really very beautiful.

"All right now, let's take a minim to see how you do in space, Myr, uh--"

"I'm Illyera," she says absently. "Illa."

A memory-bell chimes faintly. He frowns. "I don't see many gridshows . . .But I seem to recall"—

She makes a moue. "Oh, devils take it! You'd think, way out here—please, can't I be just me?"

He has it now, and a great relief it is. Of course, Illyera. One of the immortals, one of the Galaxy's great grid-queens, the queen of all men's hearts — and women's too. That mysterious, supernatural beauty, that smile that seemed to promise the secret of secrets — Illyera. Her face, a shot of her leaning on her naked elbows, had been plastered everywhere in FedBase 900, a few of his long sleeps ago. No elbows had ever looked so naked, so vulnerable. . .He had cut short that visit, he recalls. He supposes half the Federation would change places with him now.

As for Raven, he has to fill up *Mira's* tanks. No more need for his cold-backbone tremors.

"Very well, Myr Illyera. If you don't mind, would you go over to that hold there and circle round me? Take it slow, any way you like."

A trill of real laughter comes in his ears as he gathers the tether in his hand. "I feel like a pet *poonta*!"

She's grinning like a girl now, first shuffling carefully in her mag soles, then more and more freely, until at last she takes off, dives for a farther hold, and completes the circle "walking" on her hands, her feet prettily pointed.

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"Green, green," he says. "Wait here, we'll cross over the top of the hull and get *Blackbird's* hose."

Is that your ship — *Blackbird?* Raven — and *Blackbird!"* She's panting more than she ought to be. Heart?

"Yes, but no more jumping around. I'll get roasted alive, your friend promised."

"Oh, Pavel. He's sweet. He keeps them all off me." They're shuffling sedately, he has her arm. But every time he glances down at her, she's staring straight up into his eyes, with an odd, expectant look. What gives? Does she think she has some strange hypnotic effect? Is she waiting for him to throw himself at her feet? It'll be a long wait, he thinks, his eyes refusing hers, going instead to *Blackbird* nestled by the fat yacht. When they reach the ship he finds himself giving it an odd pat, as though he'd deserted a living creature.

"Oh, I wish I could see in," the girl says. Raven has tied her tether not to *Blackbird,* but to *Mira's* elaborate rails, and is busy unreeling fuel hose to reach the first of *Mira's* loading caps. Illyera looks incandescent, lit by the rays of two close blue-green suns.

"Nothing much to see," Raven tells her. "Come over here and look if you want."

And then, as she bends close beside him in the dazzling starlight, he sees — not only on her neck and shoulders, but on nearly every decimeter of exposed skin, flanks, thighs, upper arms to the elbows, and elbows to the wrists — everywhere is a network of fine scar lines, planned, symmetrical, invisible save for this trick of the light. And he knows then, though he can't believe it, what accident has struck her so cruelly.

The most drastic, irrevocable, supreme blow:

Old age.

He is looking at a masterpiece of cosmetic surgery such as he's never imagined; the woman before him is not merely an older woman, but a very old woman indeed. How long ago was it really that he'd seen her face about? Forty, fifty years?

Raven would be staggering were they in gravity; as it is, his hands have been working by themselves, connecting *Blackbird's* hose to *Mira II's* intake valves. He shakes himself, checks his work. It seems green. Meanwhile, Illyera has been looking into *Blackbird,* exclaiming something — Oh, yes, about the absence of a copilot's couch. He answers something, seeing, when he dares to look back at her, that the trick of lighting has gone. The lines have disappeared again.

But they were there — and with them, undoubtedly, is all the most elaborate inner work of replacement, regeneration, restoration. A total and ferocious holding-on to youth, a total refusal of age. And he sees, too, now that he dares to look more cooly, that

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all the exquisite tucks and tightenings have been — ever so slightly — *wrong*. A shade too much here, a tiny lump or curve there, so that the result, while a beautiful woman, is not the same woman.

Not the same as what?

He almost cries it in terror, pushing the words away from him, slamming shut the tank valve as if he could crush the thought he *will not* think. And at the same time hearing her ask:

"Look. Are you a clone?"

It would have seemed as reasonable to him if she had asked if he were a hippogriff. From the whirl of his thought he says, "No. . ."

"But I've got to know! What *is* it. Why don't you recognize me, Raven? Am I that changed? You saw my hair bleached. You *can't be* the Raven—"

And then the only answer he can make is really to throw himself at her feet, one arm clenching her legs, the other on a hold-bar, weeping in his helmet, crying incoherently, "Oh — Oh — Oh — Oh — No! Stop! Oh! —Illa, my darling, my girl Illa—"

And she crouches over him, sobbing "Oh my gods," over and over, until his storm passes. And then, "But how, Raven? How? . . . That's why I asked if you were a clone."

Slowly, he answers, "I've been asleep. . .a lot. I've been asleep all my life, since." Then, still incredulous, "Look — you *are*, you *were* at FedTech, on Fairhaven? At Fairhaven U.?"

"I was at FedTech on Fairhaven," she says gravely. "With you — you were a couple of classes behind me."

"And you left—"

She nods, sadly.

His lips move by themselves. "'The night has a thousand eyes, and the day but one; yet the light of a whole life died when. . .you. . .were gone.' You went to the grid-shows. . ."

A shrill alarm has been in his ears; it's the fuel-up alarm ringing. With a start Raven comes partially to himself, and transfers the nozzle to an auxiliary input. But his eyes won't stay away from her, they're so dilated that she sees their dark blue almost black. The light has changed again, he's seeing a girl now, the right girl: her eyes that had held his soul glowing up at him in their great smudge of lashes; the long lush lips with their secret smile; the perfect throat and shoulders and the impossibly high, full, wide-pointing breasts; the handspan waist rising like a stem from her sumptuous hips and thighs. Even her hair is back smoky black again, in this instant of shadow.

"Rehab must have wiped part of you out . . .anything painful." He remembers now; the War seemed the most respectable way of getting himself killed fast. Evidently it didn't work. "I hurt you . . . Oh, Raven—"

Without knowing how he got there, he's holding her tight now, terribly tight through his awkward suit, caressing the soft curves of hers. Rehab

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stole the details, but not the pain. "You're the first, I think you're the only woman I ever loved." She's holding him too, he can feel her tenderness, as if he were a hurt child.

But across the hull another fuel alarm is going; it brings back the bleak impossibility of everything.

"Oh gods, the tanks. Look, I better carry you." He scoops her up by the waist, goes loping over the hull like some kind of animal.

"My looks," she says when he sets her on her feet and turns to the valves. "My cursed godlost looks. They ruined everything. . . . That's why my girl, I mean my clone, why she—"

"You had yourself cloned?"

"Yes. A thousand years ago. She wanted to go, go out to a colony. I got her out before Gridworld ever saw her."

"What colony?"

"Fleetdown. But she's moved since; something happened."

Fleetdown is in the next sector. Out there someplace is a middle-aged woman, the pearly skin tanned, the long fingers work-worn. Sending home a hologram of herself on a tractor. . .He doesn't care.

Somewhen in those moments, Raven has become two men.

One is the superficially normal Raven, who completes the topping-off of *Mira's* tanks, and finally leads Illyera back to the emergency lock, brings the bag up around them and zips it. Then he unscrews the temporary port, feeling the rush of *Mira's* air filling the bag. He slides the emergency cover away, and turns to help her through to where bar Palladine must be getting impatient.

The other is a Raven who knows his whole life has changed, who cannot take his eyes off her between every task, who feels Rehab-blotted scenes of memory wheeling and shifting inside his head, becoming almost — but not quite — clear. It's the Raven who can't help asking her, at the port, "Do you remember the roses?"

And this Raven who bleeds a little when she answers, frowning delicately, "Oh, yes. . .", so that he knows she doesn't. So many, many men must have given her roses. But it was *his* quarterly stipend that went, on that extravagant blanket of real Terran roses for their last lovemaking. . . *His* hands clasping her silken haunches, *his* body weighting hers down on the great black curly bush on her belly around the brighter pink of her sex, the feel of her. . .

The Raven who recalls these things bends at the last moment, whispering, "I'll come to you. . .somehow."

"I'll be waiting," she breathes back, with that dazzling smile — he remembers now that it was always as if she knew something, came from some secret place of strage experience. . .

They crawl in backward, she first. And he hears her exclaiming to bar Palladine about how beautiful it was,

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and "What do you think? Myr Raven and I were at the same university!"

"Quite a few years back," says the "normal" Raven. "Here're your combinations," handing over the ivory chip.

"She's old enough to be your grandmother," bar Palladine grunts as Illyera gets into the cocoon to unsuit. "Now, can we get out of here?"

Just then Raven hears an instrument giving out the jitter that means it's just about to chime. But the jitter fades again. He frowns.

"Has your mass-proximity indicator been doing that much lately?"

"Ah. . .yes. Rocks?"

"Maybe. Also, maybe a ship hanging around just off range."

"Oh?"

"It's probably nothing. But you're a long way from Fed Central here, and there are a few bad actors out on the frontier sectors."

"How exciting," sighs Illyera mockingly. She has stepped from the cocoon wearing a fluffy little short-suit that makes Raven's heart shiver, it looks so like the things she once wore. But the rational Raven bats down the quiver — that sportsuit is made of pelts of *rava*-down; it would cost his whole account. "Don't be an idiot," he tells her lovingly.

"All the more reason to get going," says bar Palladine.

"Exactly. And don't — repeat — do not let any strangers in here, or let anybody get a beam on you. You represent a godlost bunch of credits flapping around with no protection."

Bar Palladine scowls at that, but says civilly enough, "Thanks for the warning. And now I think we'll settle up and be on our way."

"Right." Raven gives him the figures — *Mira II* was, as he'd been warned, a fuel hog — and bar Palladine produces his credit chips for registry in both their credit computers. Raven gathers up his stuff and is back in his ship fast; he has no wish to watch them leave. His heart has not been able to resist one last look at Illyera; he figures bar Palladine must be used to that. And it effectively insulates him from the Talkers on his route out, aside from the impression that they are running down.

He boosts out of there before the other ship's engines start.

But once at the limit of standard proximity indicators, he slows and halts, and tunes in his special high-range finder. Yes, there's the fat echo of *Mira II* accelerating away — and there by gods, is a second echo, large and slick — a sizable strange ship, on an interception course.

Raven curses. And then curses again, louder — against his warnings, *Mira* is slowing, slowing. Slowing to a stop. He watches angrily as the two echoes merge. What in the hells has bar Palladine got himself and Illyera into?

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It could be perfectly all right, Raven tells himself — a lost colony ship, for instance. But if so, why hadn't it signaled? Power too weak? Maybe. . . What was it doing, nosing around until he left? Well, maybe they were frightened of intercepting two strange ships. Maybe. But odd that they'd go so unerringly to the yacht. . . . None of his business, really, what bar Palladine wants to do.

But it is his heart's business. And even as he reasons with himself, his hands have played across the controls, jockeying *Blackbird* into position to return. And then his reason comes up with a congruent point — here is the ideal opportunity to try out a nice new piece of *Blackbird's* equipment he's acquired and not yet tested — a radar-shield for unobserved approach. Excellent. . .

He's already on course, coming into their range. Now he slows to impellor power and turns on the shield. To use it properly means a dead-center approach; the area of shielding is small. As he purrs toward the linked ships, he steadies *Blackbird* carefully behind the small circumference of undetectability. He is concentrating so hard that at first he doesn't hear an odd thing — a high, steady hum from his transceiver. When he finally notices it, he sees that it's mostly beyond audible range. A malfunction of some sort?

Holding position carefully, he puts the analyzer on it, finds it's a complex chord of frequencies, absolutely steady. And coming from the ships.

If Raven hadn't been as old as he was, he wouldn't have understood the nasty implications of that sustained EM chord. But he'd been fighting against men who knew it well. And although now it's outlawed, he knows that some unpleasant Last War gadgetry is still around.

He opens his caller's coils, and with the utmost care, sets himself to duplicate that frequency. If this is what he fears, his duplication must be perfect, or people will die hideously.

When he has it to his satisfaction, he gets up and rummages out two more loud EM transmitters from *Blackbird's* ample stores. He opens them up, and lays in his best copy of that multiple frequency. Perfect; it has to be perfect. He gets them operating to his specs, pushes the master copy under his couch, pulls out a can of Sticktite and loosens his extrusion grapple, to be ready for fast work.

Meanwhile, he is desperately keeping *Blackbird* hidden behind that ultra super absorptive field. This is no game of trying out equipment, now.

He is almost on the connected ships, flying by visual guidance. Incredible that they haven't sensed him. But the EM transmission must be jamming their sensors, and they're probably busy.

He has a good look at the strange ship. It might have been a colony ship

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once — half-hidden under burns and smears he can see her name: *New Hope*. But she isn't one now. Colony ships have an unmistakable look — so clean, and scribbled with messages of good luck and bravado. This ship is dark with dirt and ill maintained; a work-beast in uncaring hands.

And Raven sees he's been given a stroke of good luck; the *New Hope* has closed with *Mira* along her bow and locked on so that they drift head-to-tail. Tied together, neither would get away. And that's just what *Blackbird* is built to accomplish. He's about to float over them; time to act.

He fires up the torque, and sends *Blackbird* rolling around the linked ships, whipping out her wreck-securing cable. His sensors show EM peaks — alarms must be going off within both ships, but they're no help to them now. In one circuit he has the pair lashed together with the twin-strand cable that could pull a liner out of a thousand g's. And as he goes around them, he has accomplished the vital task — with his extruded grapples he has slapped and stuck a sending transmitter onto each hull. That will take care of them for a while — gods send he's set them right!

Now, with the speed of long practice, he reverses to a stop above *Mira's* emergency port, and slams the lip of his work-dock tunnel around it. His big magnetic grapple lays hold of the port and spins it in, tearing the plastic bag, as he had often spun-in the ports of burnt, corroded wrecks. He drops it inside, where voices can be heard crying out and cursing in panic. He takes no notice but snatches up his projector-gun, already loaded with sleep-gas, and fires a canister straight in. Then he edges closer to the port and fires another into *Mira* in the direction of the main lock, where she is joined to *New Hope*.

In a minim the sounds within *Mira* have quieted.

He snaps shut his faceplate and draws a work-curtain across the tunnel behind him — no need to saturate *Blackbird* — and waits till the last few stirrings from beyond the tunnel cease.

Now everyone should be asleep — unless somebody was suited up. So far only instants have passed; he has another three minim before the situation of any captives would become lethal, if he has misduplicated those frequencies.

He whips down a large sack, blows it up and sticks it on the gun. Then he makes a few approach noises and edges the bag into sight beyond the inner port.

Bang — clash! A ballistic weapon fires into the bag, and a blade chops through it to the gun-barrel. Damnation — one of the raiders *is* suited up, and is waiting for him alongside the port.

Well, Raven still has a trick left, if that's a standard suit. Salvage opera-

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tions often require fishing things out of inaccessible holes. The bastard who fired and slashed must be tight up against the hull.

Raven reaches back for his fishing equipment — actually a whippy metal rod bearing a reel wound with superwire, tipped with a vicious automatic mini-grapple. With one skillful cast he sends the triple-barbed hook spinning through the port, then checks it hard right-handed so it sweeps round the inside of *Mira's* hull where the slash came from; the action is almost too fast to see. On his second sweep he connects with something. He braces and jerks hard, sets the rod in its stanchion, and commences reeling in. The reel is geared heavy enough to pull an asteroid out of orbit. In a few spins he succeeds in dragging part of a resisting, suited leg into sight across the port. Fabric starts to tear. A hand appears, sawing futilely at the wire with the bayonet.

Raven doesn't bother trying to parley. He has armed himself with a small aerosol canister stuck on the end of his projector. This is not salvage equipment, but a choice item one of his friends in the Patrol gave to him. Its formal name is Suit-Off, but it is usually referred to as "Balls-Off."

As the tear in the suit widens, Raven gets the aerosol nozzle aimed and shoots in a couple of healthy puffs before the knife bangs him away. Then he waits.

A couple of heartbeats later comes a torrent of high volume curses, and the knife clatters to the tunnel side. The hand ungloves and dives into the tear in the suit leg, tearing it farther. The leg convulses, the hand scratches violently, and another hand appears briefly as the owner rips open his crotch hooks. In a moment the stranger will be free of his suit, but the grapple and line are obstructing him. To save time, Raven wrangles the grapple loose and reels the line in.

The stranger falls back from the port in a tangle of limbs and suit; he is trying to scratch and unsuit at once. With difficulty, he forces his helmeted head to the port opening. Raven can see his mouth opening and closing, but can hear no words. Behind the mouth is space-burned black skin and dirty pale hair. Raven shrugs.

The stranger tears open his faceplate to yell, "Give me the drench, you bastard, or I'll kill 'em all!" The "drench" is the closely guarded antidote to the ferocious itching power of Suit-Off. Raven shrugs again. He is more interested in a transmitter clamped to the man's wrist. He had been right. They were collar-slavers. And hence, desperate. The Federation's penalty for collar-slavery is death.

Slave-collars are made of an alien alloy sensitive to radio waves. So long as the collar receives its frequency, it stays loose. If the frequency is cut off, the collar constricts abruptly, shut-

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ting off the victim's air and blood supply. Attempts to loosen one by force also make it contract. The slave-controller carries an EM transmitter with a spring-loaded switch that closes if he relaxes his grip, thus making him impossible to attack. The vicious things surfaced in enemy prisons during the Last War, and were thought to have all been destroyed. But these raiders must be in possession of more. It vaguely occurs to Raven that there is quite a large Federation reward out for any; but he doesn't think about that.

Is Raven's duplication of the loosening frequency working, or are the raiders' captives strangling to death?

He can wait no longer. That yell had cost the raider a lungful of gas, he's crumpling into sleep. Raven vaults over him, whirling to check that no other suited men are in ambush for him, and then stops to yank the transmitter off the slaver's sleeve. It's as he expected, the transmitter has a pressure switch now released to "off". Raven squeezes it on and locks it — that'll relieve the emergency, if it isn't too late — and stands up, breathing hard, to look around *Mira*.

A line of bodies lies sprawled on the big lounge couch — Raven sees the orange suit of bar Palladine, the shower of pale hair that hides Illyera, and the mounds of the other three. Asleep or dead? He goes to them.

They haven't collared her — the white throat lies sweetly pulsing, unblemished. But bar Palladine's ruffled shirt-neck is cruelly compressed under a slender metallic circlet. He seems to be breathing normally, no signs of recent crushing. Raven cautiously releases the transmitter in his hand, leaving control up to his duplicate on the hull. Bar Palladine's collar doesn't move. So Raven's duplication is green! And it's sending with sufficient strength to keep the collars loose. Now he has all the time he needs.

Two other raiders in addition to his assailant lie sprawled nearby. All of them wear dingy black shirts, like some kind of uniform.

Before releasing the captives — Raven is a cautious man — he makes himself take the time to snatch out of his pack Syrettes and shoot each of the raiders a dose that will keep them out of trouble. No need to waste drench on the blond who had attacked him; the itching would wear off in his slumbers. He arranges the man's clothing decently — Raven is also a man of the Spacer's Code.

As he runs from body to body, it occurs to him that there's every legal and practical reason for him to kill them then and there. It would save air, water, and trouble. But some old scruple makes him pass over the black Syrettes and use the red knockout instead. . . Besides, these beasts may be wanted alive by Fed, for questioning on the source of the collars.

As he works, he keeps an eye on the open lock connecting with the

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pirates' ship; anything could be in there. Just to be on the safe side, he lobs another canister of sleep-gas into *New Hope* before turning to the captives.

He has thought that he'd have to go for his molecular disrupter kit. But first he bethinks himself to try an old rumor about the later imitation collars. He pulls bar Palladine into sitting position and brings the radio's transmitter into contact with the thin circlet around his throat. In a moment the thing sags loose, looser yet — until he can actually pull it off over the man's head. Good! So these *are* later Human-manufactured collars, not the alien originals. The Federation has located and demolished a Human manufacturing plant on one of the Black Worlds. The process is difficult and requires a rare catalyst; maybe these are part of its original make, not a new source. But that'll be for the Feds to settle.

Raven has been untangling the other bodies and arranging them decorously on the couch, including that slim, luscious sleeper he scarcely dares to touch. She is not quite inert and makes a tiny protesting sound that means she will soon awaken. Raven finds her translucent scarf up in the pilot's area, and wraps it around her sitting figure.

"It's all right, Illa," he opens his faceplate long enough to whisper to her. "I'm here, it's all right now, my girl."

The two ex-Talkers turn out to be what Raven thinks of as typical Fed-Central rich old boys; their skins glow with expensive health, their now limp muscles are expensively exercised; faint marks show where wattles have been discreetly clipped and eye pouches tightened. One has a full head of white hair, the other is stylishly bald. Only the bald man is wearing a collar; the raiders may be short of them. Raven brings up the transmitter and eases him out of it.

The man Raven thinks of as the Fat Boy is at the end of the line, his embroidered robe askew, and a collar murderously tight on his plump neck. He must have struggled, from fear or pain, Raven judges, squeezing him free. As he does so, he notices an odd tonsure shaved in the man's hair, and guesses that he may be some sort of priest or cult healer attached to one of the older men.

When he has them all free, he pockets the collars and turns to tackle his next job — *New Hope's* contents.

No sounds have come from the pirates' ship that he could detect while he was occupied. Raven edges silently into *Mira's* lock, and from there into a short, dirty tunnel leading into *New Hope*. Her lighting is dim and gravity weak; Raven guesses she's short of power. He uses his extension mirror to check that no one has been waiting for him, and emerges into a long, empty chamber with the pilot chairs to his left and a pile of

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some sort of pads at the aft end. A few sleep-chests are by the hull. A man could be hiding there, or in the crude-waste cubicle; Raven wrinkles his nose as organic stink penetrates his filters. The slavers must have been living in here some time.

He peers at the pilots' chairs and makes out a black-sleeved arm dangling from one. As he watches, it stirs aimlessly. Raven cracks another canister of sleep-gas and hurls it forward. The arm jerks once and is still.

He then leaps to the side, applies his stethoscope to the hull, low down, and settles silently to wait. Is he hunter or hunted? He doesn't know, but either demands patience.

The minims pass. Nothing. Silence, except for one rattling snore from the limp pilot.

Just as Raven is about to give up, it comes — something slithers against the hull down by the heap of pads. He freezes, listening hard. The soft dragging sound comes again, followed by a click against the hull.

All right.

Raven hangs the steth on his belt to serve as an in-air receiver, takes out his welding pistol, and gives the pads a burst that starts a smudge.

"I'm going to flame this pile," he tells his invisible listener. "If you don't want to get burned, come out crawling. I want to see both hands flat empty."

The pile heaves, and a slender black-shirted figure wiggles out from under, reaching out for the floor with one hand. The other is occupied, Raven sees, holding up the hose of an emergency nose mask. As the figure wriggles free, it shows as a woman, with an air tank slung over one shoulder.

If that tank had been oxy, she'd have been dead, Raven thinks belatedly. He unhooks an extinguisher can from the hull, and works the long-unused nozzle to foam the smudge.

"I think you'll be better off asleep for a while," he tells the girl. "I'm not going to hurt you while you're asleep, I give you my word. Put down that mask and breathe."

She turns big glinty eyes on him above the mask, looks him over for a few heartbeats, and cries out fiercely, "I'm not one of them! I'm a prisoner! Help! Don't let them get at me —" But she has to breathe in. Her head bows under its shock of black hair, and she crumples down, asleep.

A new puzzle. Raven bends over her, feeling his backbone twitch, but can see no collar, no weapons. He puts back the welder and picks her up by her slim waist, in the light gravity, and hangs her over his shoulder, fighting the mop of dirty hair from his faceplate.

The pilot still hasn't moved, as far as he can see. Raven dumps his captive in the lock and goes forward. The figure on the pilot couch is wearing a black shirt, but he has a collar on. Puzzle number two. Is this man a

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raider or a prisoner? No matter, no man should wear one of the diabolical things. Raven takes out his transmitter and loosens it. Then he sits down in the other seat and makes a careful space check to be sure the linked ships aren't drifting into trouble, and a quick check of *New Hope's* read-outs. As he suspected, they're low on fuel. Everything else seems normal.

He starts to pick up the pilot, then slaps his own helmet.

"Slowing down!" he mutters at himself, and turns back to the controls. In an instant he locates their trail recorder, extracts and pockets the cassette. This will tell where the raiders came from.

The pilot, if that's what he is, is lightly built, but by the time Raven has lugged both captives into *Mira* and tied them up in armchairs where they can't see each other, he is tired. Bar Palladine and his guests are beginning to open their eyes and stir. *Mira's* air system is good. Raven knocks back his helmet and takes a chair facing everybody.

The two older men and Fat Boy emit waking-up grunts, but bar Palladine's hooded eyes come steadily awake, eyeing Raven, then glancing around the lounge at the recumbent pirates and finally at Illyera. One hand steals to his throat, and his eyes go back to Raven. Raven nods. "I came back. . . .I thought you'd be better off without that. Now, do you see what I meant about not stopping for strangers?"

Bar Palladine's face clouds, but he only says controlledly, "Thank you. . . They had a girl, a girl did all the talking. Illa insisted — Hell, it's my ship. I stopped. And I was godlost sorry I did."

"Well said," Raven nods at the girl, who is murmuring with oncoming wakefulness. "I assume that was the girl? Did you have any reason to think she was a prisoner, or one of them?"

"A prisoner, I'd say. She was crying, and she begged our pardon, until one of them knocked her down."

"Oh," the girl cries weakly. "Oh, yes — they were torturing Bobby. With the collar. . . I couldn't stand it. And we *were* out of fuel, I don't know what they would have done if you hadn't stopped. But Jango said it was only for the fuel—"

"Jango?" Raven asks her.

"Jangoman, that one." She points her bruised chin at the blond Raven had snagged. "He's the leader. . . Oh! They aren't tied up!."

"As good as," Raven tells her. "They'll be well wired before they come to."

But the girl keeps staring so fearfully that Raven gets up and wires the pirates' ankles and wrists behind them to *Mira's* hull holds. Meanwhile bar Palladine has risen and is riffling through *Mira's* fancy-looking aid cabinet. Raven sees that his left shin has a nasty laser burn through the orange

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silk. One of his companions, the bald man in the blue loungesuit, is with him, holding his forearm. The raiders must have used that laser before they got the collars on them. Raven does a quick search of the raiders' pockets, finds a nasty-looking little laser pistol. He puts it with the collars in his work-pocket.

Bar Palladine is slathering tannic acid gel on both of them. Raven approves. It turns you black, but it's the only efficient burn medication. Somebody with sense had packed the aid kit.

Raven stands tall and stretches. He's used to long hours in a suit, but playing war games is something else. His condensers are sweated through.

"All right, Myr-and-Ser. First, I suggest this girl tells us her story. Your true story this time, please."

"I haven't lied," the girl protests. "They made me say we were out of fuel — and we are."

But Palladine snorts. "Giving me to understand you were a colony ship full of women and children."

"Th-that was Jangoman."

"All right, the story," Raven repeats impatiently. He can't quite look at her. "Where are you from?"

"From Cambria. Both Bobby and I are. They — Jangoman and his men — landed, oh, I haven't been able to keep track, but a long time back, and th-they killed several people and took us. Cambria has a lode of gemstones, see. They made them promise to dig a lot to ransom us, or they'd come back and kill some more. And they wrecked our transmitter so we couldn't call for help."

"Is that your ship? The *New Hope*?"

"Um-hmm—" she was weeping. "We — we were the hope of, of another colony. Fleetdown, the L-Lost Colony. Everybody got a terrible brain parasite, but they sent away us children with a few adults who weren't infected. . . Those older people were the ones they killed. My mother. They just shot them down like —like—"

"All right. I'm sorry." Raven was thanking his luck he hadn't gone to Cambria to refuel, and perhaps been caught by the pirates coming back. "Where's their base?" Where did they keep you?"

"They don't really have a base in the air. They're staying on a weird thing, a big kind of junk pile, orbiting some star, way out. It's all old ships and satellites, smooshed together. Some of the bodies hold air, see. They have hydroponics. But it's awful and dirty."

Raven's ears are tingling at what he hears. Unless he was much mistaken, Jangoman and his godlost crew had run across one of the fabled treasures of space, more mythical than real. A salvageman's dream. The story is that there are gravity-null points in space, in which millenia of junk have been slowly accreting. Now he's apparently hearing of a real one! And he

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has the route to it in his pocket! Pity the Feds'll probably get to it first, when this story comes out. . . . He shakes himself.

"How many pirates are there?"

"Just Jangoman and Steer and Mickey there is all we've seen. And maybe one left on Cambria, to — to oversee work. We were supposed to harvest for winter, see, but the pirates made them dig gems."

"And Bobby here?"

"They made him run the ship, so they could be free to — to fight here . . . Is he all right?" Her face is so dirty the features can be anything.

"As far as I can tell," says Raven. But Bobby speaks up groggily. "I'm all right, Laine, are you? Did someone rescue us?"

"Yes, I think so," the girl says doubtfully. "I hope so."

"If your story checks out, you have nothing more to worry about, Myr Laine. . . that's your name?"

"It's Illaine, really, but everyone calls me Laine. Oh, please, could you take us back to Cambria?"

"In due course, Myr Laine. First, the Feds'll be right over to Cambria to see if there are more of those characters. It's no use trying to message them first."

"N-no. . ."

"Raven, don't be so coldhearted," Illyera exclaims suddenly. "Let me help this poor girl, she's been through all hells. Let me untie her and Bobby."

"Right." Raven is a shade reluctant. "Now we have a set of facts, I hope. Conference time."

Illyera has moved to the girl and is picking at Raven's knots. Unwillingly, he gets up and helps her release the girl and the pilot. He is nagged by the notion that he has forgotten something. . .dangerous. . . And the girl bothers him. He is delighted when she vanishes with Illyera into her cubicle.

"I see no need for any conference," bar Palladine says when Raven rejoins them. "If you'll kindly get these thugs off my ship and submit your bill, I can start for home as soon as possible. I'm overdue already."

"Wrong on both counts, Myr-and-Ser," says Raven. "I don't charge for my duty as a Federation citizen to rescue citizens in peril; and if I charged for endangering myself in the process, you couldn't pay it. Next, *your* duty as a citizen is to report this to the nearest FedBase. That's 900. They won't keep you long, and you have to go back that way to pick up your beacons. But you must check in. And I may have to take back some of your fuel to get these ships to FedBase 900. Moreover, my ***Blackbird*** sleeps only one; we may need some of your cold-chests. ***And*** I could charge you with endangering citizens' lives by failing to heed official warnings, but I'll charge that off to crass inexperience."

Bar Palladine blazes. "Absolutely no—"

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"Pavel! Pavel!" Illyera pokes her head out. "Don't you think we should thank Myr Raven for coming back and saving us? Those collars—"

The other men, silent till now, speak up. "You're right, Illyera," the bald man says, rubbing his neck. "Illyera is right, Pavel. We've forgotten the decencies. I fear the shock affected us. Myr Raven, please accept my apologies and my gratitude. I'd very much enjoy hearing how you did it! and permit me to introduce myself: I'm Cameron di Connor."

The two others chime in. "Well done, indeed," says the fat younger man in an admiring tone. He turns out to be called Roy. The other older man gives the single name Danta.

Bar Palladine, assuming a more courteous demeanor, adds his thanks. "But I still do have to get home."

"Right. I'll put in my word to see they hurry things at FedBase," Raven tells him.

And so matters are decided, not without further talk and work, until two shocks make it all come unglued again.

The first is minor — the discovery that two of *Mira's* sleep chests have been hit by projectiles fired by Jangoman's gun. One is right behind the emergency port. When they open up the chests, they see the damage is so extensive that they're unusable.

"They must have been explosive pellets," Cameron di Connor says thoughtfully. "I hate to think what would have happened to anyone in them."

"Never wake up," says Raven. "Why sleep chests, Jangoman? What have you got against them?"

The white-blond pirate is now awake, watching them out of his space-blackened face and sleepy eyes. He replies, in a curious high-pitched drawl that Raven recognizes as a Black World specialty.

"As any fool would know, bullets are dangerous in a ship." His tone is more educated than Raven had expected. "The chests make good bunkers."

"Hmm," says Raven. "Remind me not to be asleep next time I'm—" And then he has to close his mouth because the second shock has arrived.

It's Illyera, pulling a reluctant Laine out of the cubicle, where she's been helping the girl clean herself and don fresh clothes.

"Look, everybody!" She pushes her forward.

And Raven sees.

Two Illyeras — rather, Illyera and a blonde counterfeit.

Oh, gods. . .

Raven, clutching a chair back, looks thunderstruck at his old love — exactly his girl, Illa, mint-fresh, blackhaired and perfect. He shakes his head like a wounded beast, unable to comprehend how this can be, unable to grasp what Illyera is saying so excitedly.

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"My clone! — I mean, my grand-clone! My clone's clone! My clone was Illandra, who went to that colony, she had herself cloned before the tragedy that wiped them out. And this is her — my — Illaine. Oh, Raven, isn't she sweet?"

"Sweet" is not the adjective, Raven thinks — though, looking closer, he sees she is sweet, too — fresh, new-made, a genuinely *young* girl, his young Illyera all over again.

But this Illyera does not remember Fairhaven college. This Illyera never loved and left young Raven. This Illyera has never seen a rose.

Beside her, Illyera looks — looks different. But she is the Illyera Raven loved . . . loves . . . He is staggered, dumbfounded by double love. So beautiful, so young, so young, so beloved — He realizes he is about to become unstuck, longs to be back in *Blackbird.*

And yet, for the surrounding eyes and ears, he must contrive to say feebly, "Yes. . .amazing."

"This changes things," says Illyera. And so it is decided all over again. There are five functional, if unappetizing, sleepchests on *New Hope,* and five left on *Mira,* in addition to the one in *Blackbird* that is Raven's own.

"I'll hitch *Blackbird* to *New Hope*, and pilot the big ship till her tanks run dry. Then I'll turn around and pull her on in to FedBase with *Blackbird.* I'll take Jangoman, and Bobby, and the — the girl. But I think you should take these two henchmen, Myr-and-Ser. And if you can, spare a couple of volunteers to come with me. We'll have to stay awake awhile until the switchover. If we put everybody asleep, the out-of-fuel alarm will wake us and we can't get back to sleep for the safety period."

"I'll come!" Illyera exclaims. "I insist on it, Pavel; this is my only chance to talk with my own dear clone! My flesh and blood. Oh, I'm so happy!"

"And I will," unexpectedly says the fat man, Roy.

"Oh, but our card games," says Cameron. "What'll we do for a fourth?"

"I'd have preferred to take the two women," says bar Palladine, icily.

"But Rama Roy — " says the full-haired older man, Danta, who, Raven has learned, had brought Roy along as a spiritual adviser and fourth at play.

"You must remember," says the fat Roy, quietly," that these men are headed toward certain death at the hands of the Federation. I cannot forgo a chance to talk with their leader. If I have any healing powers—"

"Oh, you do, Rama Roy, you do," puts in Danta.

"It's my duty to do what I can, in that interval of grace, to change his heart."

This is said with so much solemn conviction, the fat face looking momentarily quite different, that the others fall silent. Raven remembers

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that during the talks Roy had found occasion to give the raiders some water.

"I'd have preferred you to take the women," says Raven grimly to bar Palladine. "But frankly I've got to get some sleep, and I don't feel prepared to have those three animals aboard and awake with me during the first hours of the run." Danta and Cameron make understanding noises. "If you wouldn't mind? I'll see your two safely in their chests before we separate."

"No need, no need," says bar Palladine stiffly, but the other two add, "Thanks, Raven. We'd be grateful!"

One of the pirates, Steer, speaks up hopefully: "I play a pretty good game, Myrrin."

Nobody answers him then. Raven wonders if dedicated card players will forever resist the bait, even if the proffer comes from, technically, a dead man.

"Right," says Raven. "Now I've got to go out and get these boats apart."

And thus, presently, they set out for FedBase, with *Mira II* freed from the larger ship in the lead, and drawing away. Her pirates are already locked in cold-sleep, their wrists and ankles fettered. She's following her own trail-record back to a star-configuration where she can pick up a FedBase beacon. A copy has been made for the other crew, who are following in *New Hope* with *Blackbird* mated to its stern.

In *New Hope's* pilot area, the two women are curled together in one of the big pilot couches. Behind them, Raven sits on a cold-sleep chest that has been put there as an observer's bench. On the other end of the bench sits Bobby, looking disconsolate despite a cleanup and a fresh shirt with a Bohemia Club logo donated by Danta. Back in the big cargo space, Rama Roy is talking with Jangoman; only a faint murmur can be heard up here.

The women are chatting.

"— and you haven't lived until you've seen Fed Central," Illyera is telling her grand-clone. "The hub of the whole great Federation! Humans and aliens of all kinds, and — what? You mean you've never seen an alien?"

"No," says the beautiful dark-haired girl shyly. She who has faced rapes and pirates seems bedazzled by the other's account of civilized life.

"Oh, my goodness, Raven, we have to do something about this."

"Maybe there'll be an alien or two on FedBase," says Raven sleepily. He's preoccupied with a weird feeling of happiness. His girl, his girl he'd lost forever, is here. The fact that she's in two bodies seems only to make it richer, more complete. . .as though he had her very life.

He's playing with the idea of accompanying them on from FedBase; he can tell that the light that Illyera has fired in the younger girl's eyes won't be quenched by a quick return to colony life. Why not take a holiday

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and go with them? His credit account would stand it handsomely, if he stays away from *rava*-down coats. In fact, he doesn't really need to work again. He could take his double love through the stars, and make Illyera forget rich old men. . .

"Oh, Moom, and Swain," Illyera is loftily saying. "I mean *real* aliens."

"I'd love to," says Laine, wide-eyed. "You know so much. . ."

"But we can't stay anywhere," Bobby puts in sharply "You know we've got to get home to help with the harvest. . .If there's any left."

"That's right," says Laine. "Oh-h-h. . ."

"Don't worry about that," Raven tells them. "The Fed sends over a whole squad of help to put everything right, when people are attacked."

"They *will*?" Bobby is incredulous. "But we were told and told never to expect help."

"That's right, that's the normal rule of colonies. You have to make it on your own. The Fed'll evacuate you if you're dying, that's all. *But* when some disaster strikes that they're commissioned to guard you against, like raiders or alien attack, it's their duty to put you back on your feet. See? You're free to go sight-seeing. Plenty of volunteers from FedBase for bringing in a harvest."

Raven snorts. He has been keeping one ear tuned to the muttering from the big rear compartment. *Blackbird's* open work-tunnel is hitched to the stern exit of the old colony boat. Raven's wondering if he shouldn't go back and shut off the tunnel, in case Roy gets wanderlust. But no, Roy's too fat for that work-lock.

"That's great!" Bobby cheers up notably. He yawns. "D'you know, I'm falling asleep. Maybe I could go back and crawl in one of those chests for a nap? That's where — where *they* slept."

"Good. I'll escort you." Raven has no more formal doubts of the innocence of the two captives, but he has to move or fall asleep himself.

Back in the dim aft chamber they find Jangoman lounging in his bonds, on a sleep chest by the single port hole. He has his face turned to the port, ignoring the fat Rama who is sitting beside him on the chest, hands clasped in prayer position, apparently talking to the pirate's back.

Bobby picks out a sleep-chest near the aft lock where *Blackbird* is moored. "This is the one I used." He props the lid open and gets in. Raven checks that the prop is solid, that the lid seals airtight.

"I'll wake you at switchover. Rest well."

"For the first time in a long while, Myr Raven," the young man replies somberly. "I'll never thank you right."

"So all's well that ends well," says Raven jovially. He wants to check on something he's seen.

But before he can get back for-

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ward, Roy calls to him.

"Myr Raven? I wonder if you could loosen one of this poor man's bonds? You can see he's in distress."

"This poor man," says Raven levelly, "has tortured, raped and killed people."

"But look. You wouldn't treat an animal so," Roy points out.

Jangoman makes no move to show his trouble, but continues to stare out at the starfield. But Raven can see, behind his back, that he has unduly tightened the wire around one arm. The hand is blue and swollen.

"All right. Call him an animal. . . Bend over, if you want that fixed."

Jangoman makes no reply, but only lets his eyelids droop, as if to shut out an annoying sound.

"Please, Myr Jangoman," the fat priest begs. "You could lose that arm."

At this, the pirate gives a disdainful laugh. But as though a spell has been broken, he bends forward so Raven can cut the wires, saying in his high, nasal, oddly refined voice, "The flesh is weak."

"You realize that, my brother?" Roy asks eagerly. "Then you are on the first step on the Path."

"Path?" Ah, Raven has him now. This is a man of the Path, a Human-alien cult from the South. But Pathmen are supposed to take a poverty vow; the only other Pathman Raven has seen was in very plain gray, while that embroidered robe of Roy's is no poverty item. Things must have prospered with the Path.

"Flesh is dirt," says the pirate scornfully under Raven's ministrations. "Out there" — he jerks his chin at the starfields — "that's real. That's where I belong. Alone." His voice is strained, but not druggy.

"For a loner," says Raven, finishing the wire, "You've surrounded yourself with quite a pack of people. Whom, incidentally, you've led to their deaths."

"People are cattle," returns the pirate distantly. He turns his face back to the starfields and says over his shoulder, "When they. . .finish with me. . .do you suppose they could shoot the leavings back out there?"

"They may grant you a last request, though I don't see why."

The fat Rama is shaking his head mournfully, but he persists.

"Beauty is out here. . .that's true. But don't you see, by denying your Humanity, you deny the very senses that appreciate the stars?"

Raven leaves them.

On his way back to the girls, he stops at the spot where the chamber narrows to the nose section, and flashes his torch around the top and sides of the hull. His other hand comes up with a pry bar with which he prods and taps, giving grunts of confirmation.

"What's the matter?" Illyera calls languorously.

"Laine, did you know that this ship is a glued-together job?" Raven

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is fiddling with a worn plastic hanging beside the narrow waist. "Somebody welded an old freight booster onto the tail of a supply tug. This is the old air seal they used while they finished the job."

"I didn't know," Laine says. "I was too young when we came to Cambria, and I wasn't born when they first used it."

"Well, it is. That explains the position of the drive, and some other things. . . Done a long while ago. It's leaking. I'd hate to be in here if we had a high-g turn."

"J-Jangoman used to pull that old curtain across when he wanted to be alone — or —" the girl says, and shudders visibly. The gods knew what had happened to her behind this curtain, Raven thinks savagely.

Illyera hugs her gently. "Forget it, darling. Forget it all. It never happened. . . I'll see that you forget it all—"

The girl gazes at her hopefully, the beginning of a smile on her face. It's a beautiful smile. But she doesn't have Illyera's magic, this nice colony girl who happens to be outrageously beautiful. There's no irony, no mischief in her. Her black curls are swaying toward Illyera's shoulder; she must be exhausted.

"Baby," says Illyera fondly. "I'll tell you something you won't believe. When I was your age and looked just like you, Raven and I were in love."

Laine's dark eyes turn to Raven. "He's wonderful," she breathes, with a look of hero worship so close to love that Raven's heart jolts. But Laine is a very tired girl. She smiles again, vaguely, and the dark curls nestle into Illyera's neck.

As Laine drifts off to sleep, Illyera, stroking the black hair with loving fingers, beckons across it to Raven. He leans toward her.

"I remember — remember *our* roses," Illyera whispers. The gilt blonde head shakes in wonder and reproach. "My dear, my dear. . .what a little oaf I was. . ."

"Never," says Raven, choked up. Frantically he searches for distraction, and finds it.

"Speaking of high-g turns, we seem to be heading pretty close to that little system ahead." He turns to the scope and sees a pair of small stars that seem to have planets. In that direction *Mira* had disappeared.

"Yes," Illyera says. "That must be where the alarms woke us, coming out. I guess he's sticking exactly to the trail back. He's had enough shortcuts!" she laughs that lovely low laugh.

The trail she's referring to is in the guidance computer. The tail of every ship, by regulation, carries a time-lapse camera that takes backviews of the starfields all along the route. To retrace your path you simply take the record out and insert it in the guidance computer. It was *New Hope's* trace record of her path from the great junk pile that Raven had

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pocketed. Thinking of it now, he pats his pocket. That will be his next destination— but no, it won't. Not if he goes with Illyera. Well, junk can wait. He'll have to surrender it at FedBase, he guesses; but not without a copy. Oh, what could be in that accretion! He sighs, thinking of antique ships. . .

Any problem with the close pass to that system ahead won't be coming up for some while. Time for a nap. But as he debates just stretching out on the chest, not bothering to get in the couch, it comes to him that he'd better check the fuel. It's holding out better than he expected, but it would be awkward to run out and have to switch drives while they're in that system's gravity field.

He gets up into the pilot's couch, starts checking *New Hope's* readouts more carefully — and finds, beyond the main tank readout, the old indicators for the supply tug's own old tanks. Aha! So there is independent tankage, which is feeding into *New Hope*. He cuts the connection and realigns the supply for direct use. They are still accelerating; when *New Hope's* supplies run out, the drive will now shift automatically to draw from the tug. In fact, the tug could fly on her own, if she were free. Even the oxy and water supplies are stored up here . . .

Raven has leaned back and is contemplating the reconstruction possibilities of *New Hope*, conscious that he is dozing off. With half an ear he listens to the sweet voice of Illyera singing a lullaby. Again, the strange feeling of a happiness he can't recall steals over him. Dimly, he's aware that the fat Pathman has come up forward, apparently for more water. The gurgling, splashing sound strikes him as pleasant, too. . .

— And then, oh gods — he's brutally awakened by the nastiest shock of his life.

A slithering something touches his forehead and, avoiding his drowsy hand, slips beneath his neck — and tightens! Someone scuttles behind him, cloth slips from his grasp —girls scream — and he comes fully awake to find himself half choking in what can only be a slave collar.

His hand, gingerly exploring, feels fine links — he has been caught by a new type of slave collar made of links! Easy to conceal in a seam or a sticktite.

And now, too late, he recalls the thing he had forgotten — a careful search of Jangoman's torn suit.

As this flashes through his mind, his body had been reacting automatically to catch the culprit — he is lunging, arms out, as the fat man ducks back through the connecting waist and scuttles, half floating, away down the hall. Raven makes to follow — but the thing on his neck contracts so savagely across his throat that he can only stop.

Ringing through the ship comes

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Jangoman's jeering laughter. The pirate, his arms free, stops working on the wires of his leg bonds to bray in triumph.

"Turnabout, eh? Take it easy, new boy."

He brandishes something that could be a small transmitter, and guffaws again as he bends to work on his leg knots.

Raven is speechless, sick with helpless fury. Fragments of questions tumble through his head. Has the fat priest simply betrayed them? Betrayed them for money — ransoms for the girls? Or been somehow suborned by Jangoman? Above all, what can he *do?* How to get out of this? And the girls—

As he backs away from the nosecone opening, he's conscious of a sudden slight loosening at his neck. Yes! he's now nearer that transmitter he stuck on *New Hope's* outer hull so long ago — and it's still working! As long as it continues to send, Jangoman can't actually kill him. But it must run down soon. What can he *do*?

As if reading his mind, Jangoman calls again. "Something to keep you busy, new boy. Call that yacht and tell them I have their women. Tell 'em to turn back and meet me. And if they call the Fed, I'll take it out on you and the cunts."

A tweak at his collar tells him that the pirate is trying to show his power. Raven pretends to choke hard. When it's over, he goes docilely to the commo station.

"Oh, Raven, what's *happened?* What will we *do?"* Illyera asks. Laine, who has understood faster, is weeping.

"Wait. I don't know. I messed up. . . *Mira Two? Mira Two? New Hope* calling *Mira."* Just as bar Palladine's faint voice comes through, the proximity alarm jangles. Raven cuts it off and by reflex turns to the scope. Jangoman yells a query. His voice sounds closer, as if he'd hopped forward. Those knots of Raven's must be giving him some trouble.

"A rock!" calls Raven. But it isn't a rock. It is, he slowly realizes, what could be their salvation: a huge dark gas planet, hanging out here beyond the twin suns. There's his gravity well, *if* he can think and move fast enough, and *if* great luck is with him. His one crazy chance. There'll be no other — and this one has a dozen ways to fail.

"I'm turning around it," he calls. Jangoman, thank the fates, seems to have no burning desire to take over driving the ship.

"Very well." The voice is near and piercing. To Raven's surprise, it's coming from the speakers. Jangoman must have found an old intercom. "And then you can send the women back here, Raven. One at a time. I think I'll try the new one first. I'm tired of wetface. Tell Blondie I mix my tenderness with a certain amount of, ah, pain."

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So strange is the tone of these repellent words that Raven wonders if the pirate also had a cache of drugs in that suit. He damns himself for a stupid, bloody clown; missing that.

But he has no time for self-reproach. Carefully he aims *New Hope* straight at the gas giant, and kicks in all drives.

"What are you doing, Raven?" comes Jangoman's voice.

"I told you. Running this big rock." Will Jangoman look out to check?

"Get on my message."

"Right." Raven almost chokes with relief. *"Mira Two?* Bad news." Curtly, Raven tells them that Jangoman has taken over the ship, that Roy is working with him, that he himself is a collar-prisoner, and that Jangoman claims to be holding the women for ransom. "And he threatens reprisals if you call FedBase. You will now turn back. Repeat: Turn back for rendezvous. Our coordinates will follow. Over."

"Shall I figure the coordinates, Jangoman, if you want to meet him?"

The field indicator is already showing the gas giant's gravity pull as a component of their acceleration. It will stay unnoticed in the ship, since it's straight ahead. But it'll take time to get deep enough for Raven's wild purpose. And for that he wants the coordinates, too.

While he works the computer, he muffles the mike and beckons to Illyera, who has been watching him, wide-eyed with fear.

"Illyera darling —" he murmurs when the perfumed head comes close. "I'm going to make a fancy turn soon. I'm pretty sure I can shake that booster loose. I want you two to be ready to hold tight. And — suit up."

At that she turns to glance at her suit, and Raven sees his second error. The fatal one. There is her suit, and his — but Laine's is back in her sleep-chest. Two suits, three people. Oh, no.

Raven stares numbly at the suits. His head is throbbing with pain from the intermittent choking, he is tired to death, he can't believe this blow. And as he grunts like a man dealt a knockout, he sees Laine has followed their gaze and guessed.

Two suits, three people.

The terrible logic assails him; involuntarity, he looks from one to the other — and sees that they sense that, too.

He is choosing between them.

He must.

For an instant that's the longest in Raven's life, he vacillates. It's only an eye blink in the outer world, but a hundred things pass through his head. A young woman with her life before her, versus an old, old woman who has lived to the hilt — a naive, blank girl, versus his love, his love who remembers his roses, who is Illyera's real rich self — a colonist's healthy young grin, versus the magic smile that has haunted his dreams — a

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stranger, versus one so intimately his — and yet —

Meantime a hundred things seem to be happening at once. His fingers have come up by reflex with the coordinates of their position. Jangoman is yelling at him: Raven hears some rational part of him reply, "I'm going to turn back and put us in orbit around that rock, with your permission, so they can find us. Right?"

"Be careful, new boy."

He hears his own voice sending the coordinates to *Mira*, and their faint acknowledgment.

But his whole soul is dominated by the terror of the choice before him. The two women are staring at him. He hears Illyera whispering, "Take her, Raven. Take my girl. I've had —" and Laine cuts across her: "No! I won't! Take her, she's my —" But he can't listen, can't "discuss" this. How can he bear to watch either of them die in a vacuum, as die one of them must when the nose cone breaks away? Which one? *Which one?*

No! He can't.

His whole being refuses it. Neither must die.

Does that mean that he himself must? He will, if he gives up his suit.

Is that the only way?

No, again. He has to run this trick. Impossibility. There must be some other way. Only, what? And that planet is coming up fast. They're already deep in its gravity. He *must* move. . . . But what to do? A memory skitters across his mind. Enough to gamble on?

Total frustration explodes into total action.

"Can either of you fly this thing? If not, you better learn fast. We're turning."

He leans forward and bashes the drive controls to send *New Hope* into a violent U-turn. Gravity reels. Amid screeching and groans of strained metal, the yells from Jangoman, Raven leans from the pilot couch and lifts Laine bodily into it. "Take hold. Keep her pointed up. When you can get into orbit, start sending out that Mayday there. You'll be in a vacuum here in the nose cone. Hold on till somebody comes. And —" he throws a suit at each woman "— suit up! Now!"

"No, Raven, no! Oh, no!" they cry, being buffeted by the force of the turn.

"Shut up and suit up. And you, Illyera, pull this curtain across after me; it'll slow things down." Crackings and squeals of the breaking weld are coming from the joint; air is already rushing to it as bolts tear loose. The g's of the turn slam him hard against the hull, but he rebounds into the already bending passageway, ramming a couple of fast pries at the tearing joint with his iron.

"Now close this up. I love you. *Move* — you godlost fools!"

On that, Raven starts the fastest, longest run of his life.

Back through the aft chamber to-

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ward *Blackbird* he goes. A fat figure is tottering at him, mouth open. He kicks it in the stomach as he goes by, half scrambling on the side of the hull, half momentarily helpless in glides. The booster shell is buckling around him, the outgoing air is fighting him, and the godlost collar is tightening, as his distance from the hull transmitter grows.

Jangoman is ahead in the shadows; he has long ago released his transmitter. Puzzled that it fails to stop his captive, he wastes a precious moment fiddling with it before he leaps to intercept Raven, one leg still trailing wire. Too late — Raven springs hard, evades a hooking foot, and is past. But at that moment the collar grows tighter still; he can barely pull a thread of breath to continue his crazy flight. Already he can see *Blackbird's* open tunnel port, just ahead.

The pirate behind him pauses, and Raven feels rather than hears a bullet whistle past. Just at his side a sleep chest explodes. Oh gods, Bobby is in there. Was. Death. But there's no time for dead men now — Raven's almost made it.

— Too late? The collar constricts hard on his throat, nearly cutting his head off. Nightmare pain — with his last strength, all but dead, Raven twists inside the tunnel, yanks the workdoor shut, and makes himself dive into *Blackbird,* to live or die.

For a long, gasping moment he can hardly realize he's alive, the gamble won. The deathly collar has loosened. It's bathed in the frequency chord coming from under *Blackbird's* couch, where a lifetime ago he had stowed the master transmitter. It's still sending.

For how long? Will it quit next moment or next hour? In the bucking turmoil and confusion of his ship, tied to the gyrating booster-hull, Raven doesn't try to guess, but only snatches up the transmitter and eases the relaxed collar-chain off himself.

Free! But the broken booster is dragging him down to death; the searing gases of the planet so close below are strong in the air. Raven struggles up into the pilot's couch, casting one quick glance upward as he grabs the controls. Over the curve of the planet he sees a spark — that could be the thrust fires of the separated nose cone, disappearing round the planet's limb. If all went well — if they got suited up in time, if the fuel held — they should be green. Has he actually saved them both, done the impossible?

Meanwhile his hands have automatically cut in the torque and retro-boosters that will literally unscrew *Blackbird's* nose from what was *New Hope's* stern, gripping hand- and leg-holds as he's flung about. Now everything depends on whether that frail work-port holds shut; there's no time to go forward and dog the regular lock.

It holds. Suddenly a fat shadow

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that is the booster, gape-mouthed, is falling away from his ports. Jangoman and that fat betraying weasel, Roy, are dying or dead in there — a kinder death than they'd offered their victims. And poor Bobby's bullet-shredded corpse with them. Well, the lad went to sleep happy, and just never woke. No way Raven could have saved them all.

On that thought, he gets the crazy spin slowed, and is able to stand *Blackbird* up on her own high-g drive and start her climbing out of the giant planet's grip. . . . For the first time in days, Raven has nothing to do but relax and wait.

Held-back panic grabs him by the spine, buckles his knees, sets his elbows shaking and jerking, kinks his gut in knots of nausea. A dozen feelings he'd had no time for jolt him now, sending sweat sluicing down his belly, make him shiver so violently his teeth rattle. His blood curdles with repressed fear at the same time as it bubbles with triumphs. Visions stream and mingle in his head — Bobby's burst sleep chest mixes with Illyera's silvery hair, Roy's broidered robe drapes over his gross belly above Laine's young legs, bar Palladine's hawk eyes half hide the instruments on his panel — he can feel the steel pry bar in his hand, pounding at the ships' joint, while the same hand feels Illyera's tender body through her suit; the acridity of sleep-gas mingles with remembered roses, his own voice echoes in his ears. And over all is the terrible, sick eternity of the moment when he tried to choose. Too much, too much! Stop it!

As his little ship mounts higher he forces himself to a shuddery stillness, takes a long, deep draft of *Blackbird's* air, and then another; works to relax his legs, which are still pounding *New Hope's* hull in a race for life. A strange feeling emanating from somewhere inside is helping him quell the turmoil of reaction. His fingers, shakily tuning his caller for what he hopes to hear, grow steadier and calm. What is this? He doesn't know, but only works over the hands until, suddenly, the call he wants is there — the echo of an unmistakable Mayday squeal.

Somewhere on the other side of the great planet, the women are blasting their SOS into space. They're all right.

He can't believe it, but the evidence is there. After his one awful stupidity, he's managed to work his craziest chance and save them both. His love lives. All he has to do now is track down their Mayday and reach them.

There's a little green key on his panel that will do the job automatically, in case Raven needs to be free for emergency tasks along the route. Another neat gimmick he's not yet used.

But as his fingers seek the green key, Raven suddenly identifies the new strange lightness that has grown

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in him, and helped him cancel the residues of terrors and heart-piercing pain.

It is — freedom.

This is what freedom felt like. Every contour of his old couch speaks of it to him now. How easy, how uncomplicated, how stressless on the heart! Nothing to concern him. And that great Golconda of a junk pile waiting, only he knows where!

The moment he presses that little green key, all this will be gone. In its place, of course, will be the ecstasies of Human love — the blissful puzzle of choice — the thrills and revels of Human life in the luxury of Fed Central — the forgotten dreams all come true. And nothing is irrevocable, freedom can be recaptured. But. . .but. . . he has it *now*. Until he presses that key.

He finds his hand has been fingering the pocket in which he'd stowed *New Hope's* trail guide to the great wreckpile, and angrily makes himself stop. Yet a thought occurs to him. That trail guide is no use without the latest link, the trail from where he is now back to where the three ships met and *New Hope's* trail begins. And while they'd been coming here, *Blackbird* was being towed with her tail holo disregarded because he'd been driving *New Hope*. Had it run out? It would make no sense regretting a Golconda he couldn't get to anyway; why not check this out before he scrambles his head with any more idle thought? It's overtime to suit up and close the work-tunnel properly, anyway.

As he clambers swiftly into his spare suit, two other thoughts occur to him. First, in all likelihood the women believe he's dead. They couldn't possibly have seen *Blackbird* come free from the falling booster. They may not even believe it had been possible — in fact, it barely was.

So they're probably mourning him right now, up there in that half-a-nose cone, uncomfortably waiting for the Patrol or bar Palladine to reach them. The thought gives Raven a violent urge to drop all this and rush to them, to end the misery that is needlessly tormenting his love; but it fades. The work-lock secure, he goes aft to crawl down the access shaft to where the trail assembly sits. It's on the way that he has the second thought — not a thought, really, but just a flash of profound realization; how very hard it is to find a ship silent in space, especially if the ship's pilot doesn't care to be found! Not a reflection, of course, but one that comes with peculiar urgency now. H'mmm.

As he approaches the tail camera, he hears a click — So-the time-lapse record *has* been functioning all through the tow! And the cassette has not run out! Which means that the missing piece is in his grasp — he could start from here, right now, and follow its guidance back to where he met *Mira* and *New Hope* — and then

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follow *New Hope's* record all the way to that monstrous what-is-it Laine and Bobby had described!

Just as he reaches to open the cassette holder, the camera gives a chime, and sets up the buzz that means the record has run out.

Whew! If he'd been a few minutes later in looking back here, all he'd have found would be a used-up record that had ended gods knew when and where, of no use at all to him.

With slightly shaky fingers, he extracts the old cassette and drops in a new. . . . Have the gods of chance been speaking to him?

But as he returns to the pilot area, bearing his two priceless trail tracks, he seems to hear — what is it? — Laughter? Sweet laughter in the stars. Are his ghost-girls laughing at him? Are they so sure of his heart? Or are they merely laughing to be on their way. to the glitter of FedBase and the glamour of Fed Central? Raven stares out into the starfield, seeing smoky eyes that change to far suns. . .and back to eyes again.

Freedom and love, love and freedom, wrestle in his brain. And he must soon get some sleep, or risk falling asleep on a course to nowhere. Random thoughts veer about in his mind as he clears the panel:

How long would two beautiful women wait for a man they'd all but seen die? And by what right does he assume that they are his, now? Both, or even one of them? The galactically-famous beauty — as she nears Central, her entourage will close round her — the hundreds of people who have some claim on her, the doctors, dressers, designers, Gridworld people who have maintained her. No mere man can possess Illyera now, he guesses. No matter what she herself feels. The best he can hope for is to be allowed to trail in the procession. Even though she remembers the roses now, sooner or later, will it come to that?

And Laine? What does he know about her, really — she is scarcely old enough to know herself. He can show her the glittering world, he can teach her about roses; he can love her as he loved her clone. But what if Gridworld sniffs her out? Or what if her colony childhood is in her blood, so that sooner or later she will be drawn back to Cambria? To live and grow old in a struggling young colony, an outsider himself — is that what would lie ahead of him, with Laine?

But she is — they are — so beautiful. The love that had filled him and burned him up is strong in him now; the love that he had thought was lost forever. The love that Rehab had stolen from him to save his silly young life. Can he bear to lose it again?

Yet even as he thinks this, a sort of mist is stealing back. The mists of Rehab, perhaps. They are urging him to drift away, away from the overpowering enigma of choice, away,

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physically, among the starfields; surely this is part of his overpowering need to sleep.

With a pang that is not pain he remembers the halcyon feeling when he rested behind them on the observer's seat, simply happy in the possession of his love, or loves. Is it possible that that moment was *it*, the pure, uncomplicated happiness that will last him all his life, the culmination and fulfillment of his lost love? No; it can't be, he protests. But . . .

Far away, yet so near, the echo of a Mayday trills, like the voices of long-ago Lorelei calling to him. Ghost-girls, their slender fingers tenderly reaching for the bonds of Raven's heart . . . Positively, he must decide now.

One of his hands lingers by the small green lever, the other holds the guidance tape, ready to drop into *Blackbird's* computer. Ghost-eyes glow in the starfield, a star sweetly, richly hums an old old tune. Raven's heart gives a lurch in his chest, like a newborn animal struggling to rise, amid the closing mists of oncoming sleep.

He decides.

Long years later, a contented, still-young salvage officer taps out a little jingle on *Blackbird's* keyboard:

The night has a thousand eyes,
so fine to see;
What use is the heart's sunrise
If you are not free?*

**With apologies to Francis William Bourdillon*

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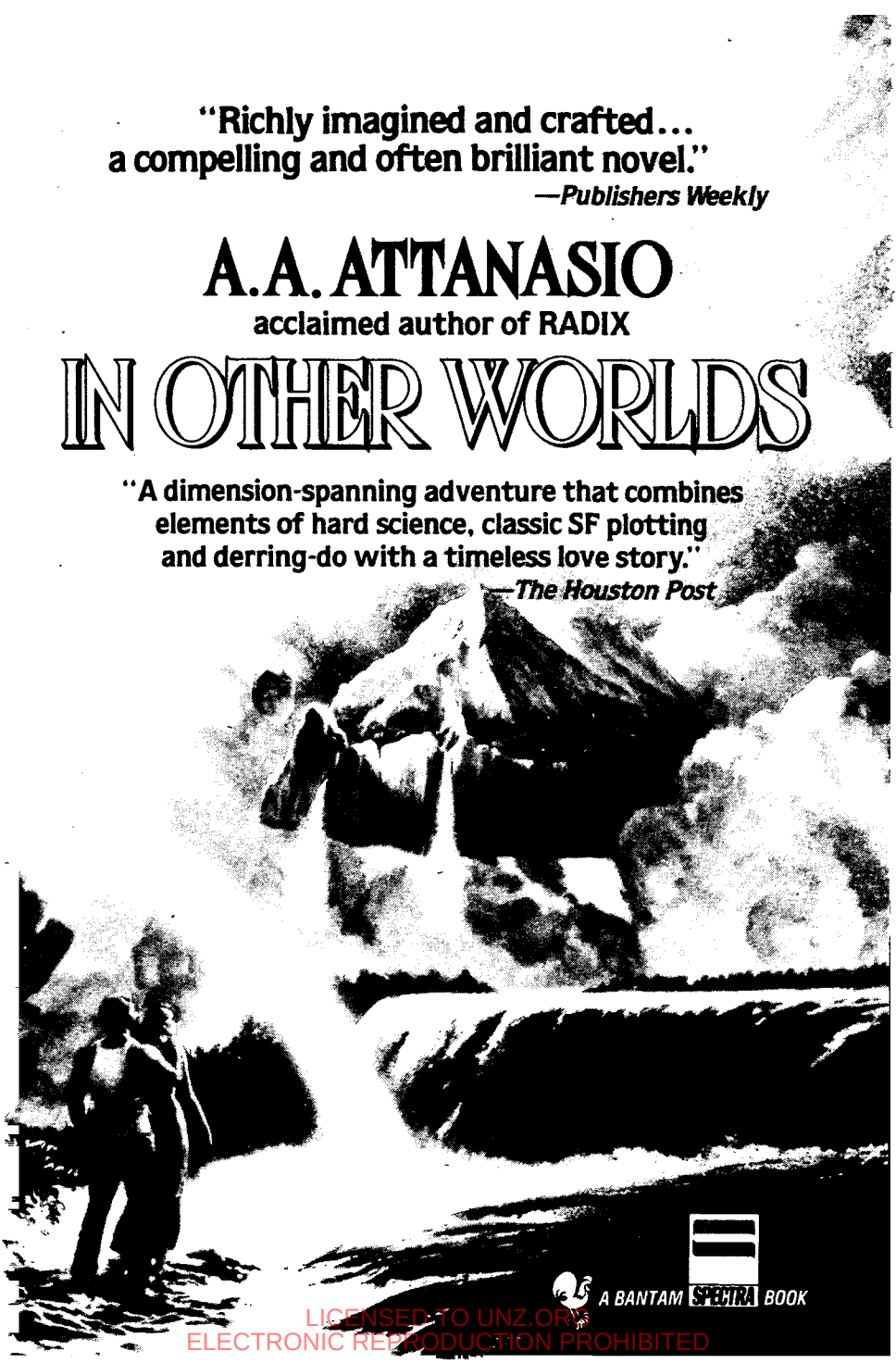

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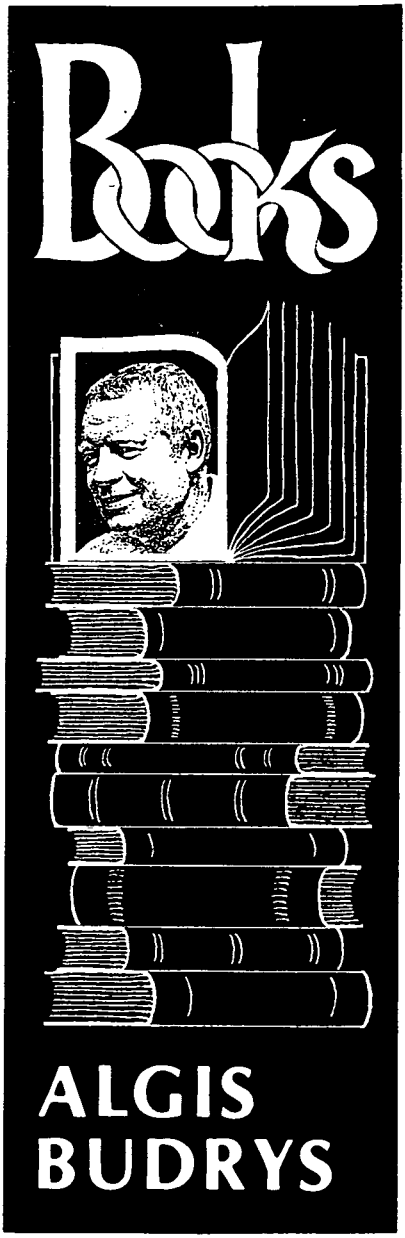

The Postman, David Brin, Bantam, $14.95

Schismatrix, Bruce Sterling, Arbor House, $15.95

Philip K. Dick: In His Own Words, Gregg Rickman, Fragments West/The Valentine Press, $9.95

Philip K. Dick: The Last Testament, Gregg Rickman, Fragments West/The Valentine Press, $9.95

The Postman is almost curiously old-fashioned, in that it's a hopeful post-apocalyptic novel. But all our books this month reflect hope. Why not? SF is a profoundly hopeful art. Even its most dedicatedly ingenious tales of apparently unremitting cataclysm must, by the nature of prose, include a narrative presence of some sort—an actual character, or at least the author's voice.

In almost all cases, this presence survives at least until the last sentence of the tale. Even when the author tries to convince us it has died at that point, the mechanics of storytelling are against success. The options are to either break off a first-person narrative in mid-sentence ("I have set the sorkin felker to detonate the Universe in ten seconds. I am watching the timer tick down. Profound emotions grip me. I scribble furiously at this diary. I think, therefore I—") or to describe events in third-person past-tense style: "It was quiet in the bunker at last. Then Krieger pushed the final button and Creation became an ovation of chaos."

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Those are ineffective options. Someone has to have survived to recall receipt of the first-person message; the more thorough the asserted disaster it portrays, the more obvious its narrator's delusional madness, and, more important, his singularity. The reader looks out the window at the wide omnipresent world while the hallucinating narrator's "present" disaster has already plunged into the past, unhappened, and become a lie. Similarly, though from Krieger's point of view the Universe may have discorporated, clearly from the narrator's viewpoint it has not. Krieger's thinking, no matter how profound, was confined to some universe centered on Krieger; one, in the end, of only abstract interest to the reader. The message is always the same: There are no unsurvivable disasters. Some — perhaps most — individuals may fail of life, but some will not.

Which will not fail? Ah . . . on proposed answers to that question, we have built a literature.

There are a hundred ways to verbalize this fact, but the fact is that this is inevitably the "purpose" SF serves in some unique way. What way? Ah...we are down to the hard questions.

Well, all literatures offer their readers formulas for disaster-avoidance. The protagonists offer sometimes unlikely but ultimately successful actions and attitudes, the antagonists display plausible but ultimately fatal techniques. In SF, however, our arenas are not confined to generic universes, or even to the "real" ("mundane") universe.*

For those readers who can stand up to it, SF offers valuable extremes in pro- and contrasurvival scenarios. But there is I think more to SF's uniqueness than mere exaggeration of DF's qualities. The milieux of SF are presupposed to be imaginary, and this makes a pretty symmetry when held up to DF, as if the two literatures were mirrors of each other. That's a false parity.

The milieux of DF in fact do have "reality" — many different people can go to "Washington," for example, and come back with similar descrip-

**What's usually called "mainstream," "traditional," or "general" fiction ought to be called "descriptive fiction." in counterpoise to "speculative fiction." (All existing terms for DF by implication legitimize the "mainstream's" absurd tacit position that it was here first and SF is some sort of late and less legitimate foundling.) In fact, the only clearcut difference between the two arts is that no matter what a work of DF is ostensibly about, it always presupposes an accurately described actual milieu. (If it doesn't presuppose that, it's at once SF per se.) The presupposition is what counts, not the absence of misapprehensions or deliberate errors in the description. Most descriptive fiction is, indeed, fantasy by any objective standard, but not in the eyes of its readers . . . and many of its authors, I suppose.*

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tions of it most of the time. They can be photographed in front of the "White House." Some of them can even move in, carrying with them various internal delusional systems but nevertheless sleeping in the same bed Abraham Lincoln slept in, with his delusions. SF is not like that. The milieux of SF spring from *individual* imaginations. It is true that No Man is An Ylande; a writer's imagination is conditioned by various levels of reality-awareness — that is, of an at least partial acceptance of education, news reporting and the general social consensus. Any writer's fictions normally include a consistent attempt at plausibility . . . of reference to "reality." But there are many mansions within plausibility; it's not by mere obfuscation that scholars of SF can find ikon and archetype rampant in our art, and that even good psychologists can point to places in SF where we come a lot closer to the primal scream than is usually found in descriptive fiction, or even in the very best generic "crime" dramas.

SF does, inevitably, tap into not only what we can imagine but also into what we usually cannot and will not imagine ourselves imagining. In its most shatteringly effective cases, it speaks of what flourishes underneath human wishing and dreaming . . . that undiscovered but undeniable place where we each really live; the life/death internal reality of which SF is tacitly descriptive. In dealing with that reality, we do not depend on the testimony of outsiders; it is realer than anything even our loved ones can convince us of. It houses the only purely first-hand experiences we can ever have.

So there are not two literatures, there is one — the mirror curves 'round on itself. But for various practical purposes, we can speak of a DF and an SF as if their characters somehow dreamed differently.

We have come upon a time in SF when, for various reasons, one of our most intense persistent themes is the reconstitution of reality. To this aspect of our art, we are currently bringing our most energetic ingenuities. But for something to be an SF theme, it must always have been an SF theme, and it's notable that after early novelist Mary Wollstonecraft wrote *Frankenstein*, she then wrote one of the earliest "last man" novels, *The Last Man*.

Last "man" stories are ipso facto also mutable-reality stories and man-as-a-god stories (speaking of *Frankenstein*). The world of the last surviving intelligent creature is whatever he or she can make of it.

Whatever else "last man" stories do — and there have been thousands of them, many by some clever minds indeed, so they have by now done a very large number of ingenious things — by their nature they declare that much of "reality" depends on social consensus and that the con-

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sensus by its nature modulates individual power. By their copious existence, they affirm that many of us realize this, and don't like it. That is, we don't like it as individuals. As rational members of the species that invented civilization, with its vital dependency on social contracts, we realize we have to promote it. If we promote it too single-mindedly, of course, we preserve a totally rigid civilization by lobotomizing individuality.

This is the chronic conflict that generates the events of human history, and also modulates our ability to record and study them, and to extrapolate from them. It is a conflict which has risen to fever pitch over the past few decades and is still, I think, intensifying exponentially. SF writers come into their *floreat* now young enough to propose dramatic social actions, old enough to have acquired quite an armamentarium of data from which to extrapolate, and, in the case of David Brin, old enough to have apparently read a fair sampling of last man stories written before our nuclear time, when solutions were simpler because mankind appeared basically as distinguished from conditionally reasonable and civilized.

The Postman is not, however, a naive book. Its resemblance to such classics as *Earth Abides* is real and affectionate, but Brin is a child of our time and, as a physicist, better equipped than most to visualize what the real World War III, if fought at all, will leave of this planet. So, like Robert A. Heinlein and other qualified thinkers before him, he postulates a fuzzily defined limited conflict just large enough to let his story happen . . . not, in other words, as large as life, but as real as our psyches.

In his story, a man named Gordon somehow survives the collapse of planetary civilization and the utter desolation of the American mid-west. He wanders toward Oregon, where he assumes a decent life is at least possible. The Earth is not totally depopulated; he encounters bandits — was at times something like a bandit himself, perhaps — and villagers, and neobarbarian cultures. Most people have a common enemy in Survivalists, who in this story are organized around an ideology of might-makes-right and who are indeed, in packs and individually, mightier than anyone else. Under pressure from some rival organization in northern California, they are moving up the Pacific coast into Oregon, where they will inflict increasing distress on the peaceful fortress-minded culture organized around a (former biker?) named Powhatan, on a university-town civilization centered on Cyclops, a supercomputer who seems to have survived the particle-storms of nuclear bombing, and on the curiously endearing movement that Gordon has inadvert-

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ently and fraudently set in motion.

Fleeing from bandits, Gordon comes across a long-hidden U.S. Postal Service vehicle. Cold and nearly out of supplies, Gordon salvages the dead driver's jacket and cap. To carry what little he owns, he takes the mailbag. He almost, but not quite, dumps out the mail. In the first village he comes to, he finds that people want to believe there is still a United States out there somewhere, and that civilization is returning, as indicated by the existence of a letter carrier.

Gordon goes along with this. He exploits it for his own benefit, accepting shelter and adulation, concocting a phantom government back in St. Paul, eventually forging all sorts of documents. Because letter-carriers by definition have routes, he doesn't stay long in any one place, and begins carrying real mail, recruiting additional postmen of both sexes, and gradually weaving a real civilization into existence based on nothing more than his uniform, his asserted role, and — most of all — the imperishable desire of the villagers to believe in what he "represents." And what he represents eventually prevails even over the nomadic Survivalists, Powhatan's baronialism, and the supercomputer culture's elitism.

Gordon is a complex character. Thinking himself a reprehensible opportunist, he treats fairly and as much as possible gently with everyone. Given opportunities to become a dictator, he avoids them. Among the documents he forges as issued by the "Restored United States" are, in effect, a wide-open new Bill of Rights and a new Constitution, and before he leaves the pages of the book it is clear that he himself, hunted and scared in the dubious shelter of that long-lost right-hand-drive Jeep, was the first adherent of the Postal Service ideal reality.

It's this one charming aspect that endows special worth upon what is otherwise not an impeccable book. Full of half-realized characters and unsmoothly unfolded events, it reads like a *Book Digest* version of the actual work. You may not even notice those other aspects; you may not care, so beguiling is the idea of the book as distinguished from its text.*

Now, Bruce Sterling is what they have begun calling a "cyberpunk" — one of a new generation of SF writers who have in effect burst upon the scene as if erupted from the brow of

**Someday if they don't stop giving Brin awards and money long enough to edit him properly, he, his publishers and we his readers will all lose. The initial burst of charming and/or socially praiseworthy ideas will have slackened a little, the need for a better grasp of storytelling* per se *will make itself felt, and Brin, like many another bright young star before him, will be left wondering where his career has gone. This will be a notable shame, in his case.*

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Norbert Wiener. Hip, staggeringly erudite in the vocabulary and for all we know the actual data of avant-garde science, he thereby conveys a sense of enormous intelligence while telling us a fast-paced tale set in a convincing near-future where mere humanity and its accustomed perceptions yield to a fecund, lightning-shot array of futuristic images in which we glimpse ourselves becoming part machine, part android in varying proportions, but never again mortal.

The most prominent of these books is William Gibson's 1984 *Neuromancer*, which our community received with a glad cry that included every major award, juried and popular-voted. That appears to have been a signal, for the cyberpunk school was thereupon swiftly identified and named, for all that I suppose some of its alleged members are spitting mad about their inclusion. (Always happens. Was there ever, in fact, a single author who acknowledged membership in the 1960's "New Wave?")

Well, if there are cyberpunks, Sterling is now their best. *Schismatrix* is a better book than *Neuromancer*; it covers more ground than its nevertheless excellent predecessor.

The plot concerns the Shaper-Mech circum-Solar conflict. In Sterling's scenario, humanity has moved off a riven Earth into a myriad increasingly distant artificial habitats, each becoming a political entity no matter how small, each with a fully Balkanized set of ideologies. The major conflict, however, is between the cybernetics physical engineers and the gene-manipulators, the Shapers. A thousand schisms rive each of these two broad-stroke ideological formats, and it quickly becomes clear that there is no such thing as pure Shaper or pure Mech. What they share is the dream of an idealized society with ideal citizens. What they get is a tangled and limitless set of variations. These include states in which the dead speak in a variety of voices, the living inhabit varying bodies including some you never thought of, and some levels of reality incorporate the existence of the Universe as an exhaustible event.

Sterling shows us this through the experiences of a varied cast of ultra long-lived characters enduring/creating a long-term historical panorama. You would not expect much resemblance to *The Postman*. But Sterling's protagonist, Lindsay, is exactly like Gordon . . . and exactly like us.

And, incidentally, like *The Postman, Schismatrix* is episodic and not always effectively episodic, leaving some crucial events offstage while over-detailing essentially trivial ones, scimping some of its good characters, tangling us up in too many complex genealogies in other cases. Young writers will do this with panoramic novels, and some critics will note approvingly that in this their works resemble actual history. But history is

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only "actual"; of fiction, we demand reality.

Nothing is ever new; *vide* Wollstonecraft, who built on Defoe with far more than coincidental homage. If *The Postman* recalls a George R. Stewart novel from the late 1940's, *Schismatrix* recalls Frederik Pohl's "Day Million" of the 1960's. But the daddy of reality-twisting in our time is the late Philip K. Dick, who was grasped by it in the earliest days of his mid-century career and embraced it in return, matching pseudopod for pseudopod, carrying it out to metaphysical extremes . . . .*

At any rate, Gregg Rickman went and did what other scholars ought to have done for other giants in our field and have not done. He interviewed and studied Dick to a fare-theewell before that genius's death, and he got it down on tape and in transcript.

**At this point, I began picturing Dick as a squid among the stars grappling Arthur C. Clarke's whale from* Childhood's End. *Fortunately, in most realities this footnote does not exist.*

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A forthcoming third book — *Philip K. Dick: A Life* — will complete the set. In a durable and attractive trade-paperback format, these substantial volumes constitute a permanent trove for scholarship into SF as literature, Dick as SF writer, Dick as figure in a slice of literary history, Dick as social animal, Dick as victim, Dick as tyrant, Dick as metaphysician, Dick as hallucinator (?), and on, and on.

Rickman does not have to be impeccably interpretive of the raw data, although I think he does well. What he has done best is to set things in motion and stand aside. It's Dick who comes off the page, not Rickman, though obviously Rickman had to corral Dick, had to formulate questions that Dick would respond to, and had to spurn boredom over the course of a massive and almost endlessly recomplicated task.

He is in fact not yet bored. If you knew Dick and would like to tell Rickman about it, he wants you to contact him at FRAGMENTS WEST, 3908 East 4th Street, Long Beach, CA 90814.

It may be too late to get your recollections into the third book, but Rickman will make good use of them somehow, and they could not be in more conscientious hands, I think.

For once, we have a single-author study that makes its subject seem to have nearly lived in actuality. I believe Dick would have chuckled over the aptness of that.

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Karen Joy Fowler wrote "The Poplar Street Study," (June 1985). She returns with a superior story about two boys from different times who share a lonely path. . .

Wild Boys

BY
KAREN JOY FOWLER

The village of Brenleah was surrounded on three sides by forest, like the shadow of a great hand, cupped and trying to close. It could be warded off with steel in the spring and fire in the fall, but it always returned, sending its roots into the fields, its branches against the fences. The villagers called it the king's forest, but this was a hubris about which the forest itself knew nothing.

The fourth side of Brenleah was open to the road. My father said that the road began at the capital, carved into the very stone of the earth. By the time it reached Brenleah, it was merely dirt. We were, after all, only a little ending and one of many. "The road," my father told me once, "is the great story," but all great stories have small branchings that seem important and complete to those who live them. One man's ending is another's beginning, and this is always true. This is what my father taught me. Of all the men in Brenleah, only my father, given the two enemies, the forest and the road, feared the road more.

The sign on the freeway exit said, "You are now entering Villanueva, a planned community." Wystan had been five years old when his family had first moved in. Then there had been two adjoining vacant lots on his own street and a large, untilled field a little more than a block away. But the plan had called for the lots to become townhouses and the field a park with a drinking fountain, a blue port-a-potty, and two slightly shaded picnic tables made of concrete instead of wood. There was nowhere left to play, except for the creek, which was on private property — even if Wystan had someone to play

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with, which he generally didn't.

He was down at the bike path after a spring rain looking for toads. You hardly had to look, they bloomed in such profusion. No matter how parched the summer, how frozen the winter, they popped from the mud in the thousands after the first rains. Wystan loved the toads, wet brown jewels the size of human fingernails. You could cup your left hand over them like a roof, tickle them with your right, and they would leap into your raised palm.

Their season was brief. They ate no one's plants and bit no one's arms, so the Villanueva planners ignored them, unlike the moon-green caterpillars and summer mosquitoes, each of which had individual abatement programs, subplans of the master plan, devoted only to them. The boys who lived in Wystan's neighborhood had their own plans for the toads. They were motivated by the sheer volume; you don't value something so abundant. The boys were experiencing a toad-glut.

They built pyramids out of toads and tried to run them over with their bicycles. A single toad was hard to hit; a pile of toads improved the cyclist's odds. The corpses of a dozen successful runs were already smashed into the asphalt. Wystan's heart flattened in sympathy. He became a toad-rescuer, scooping up uninjured toads, transporting them to the safety of the grass. He did this with such stealth and cunning he had completed five successful missions before he was noticed.

He was kneeling, cupping his hand around the sixth toad, when Enrique's tire skidded into his wrist. Enrique was eleven, Wystan's own age, but better at sports. "Get out of my way, Wissy," he said angrily, taking a quick offense in case Wystan was hurt and started to cry. Wystan wasn't. He closed his hand around his toad and stood up.

"Wussy," said Jason. He was two years older and the sort of boy who would go for your head in dodgeball even if only a hit below the waist counted. Jason was stringing toads together into a toad necklace. He had seven so far. He held his work against his little brother Matthew's chest and stood back to examine it critically. Fourteen long back legs twitched over the words "E.T. Welcome Him." "More," Jason decided. "Give me yours." He didn't even glance in Wystan's direction, but Wystan knew the sentence was directed at him.

"I don't have any," he said, his voice high and unconvincing. He cupped his hand tighter to minimize the size of his fist.

Jason's face expressed surprise. "Sure you do, Wuss." He was all friendliness, too much older, too much bigger than Wystan to need to resort to a threatening tone. "Open your hand."

Wystan didn't move. The toad

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squirmed inside his fist. Jason took a step toward him. "Open your hand," he repeated quietly. Wystan decided to die for his toad. His feet made the decision, taking his head completely by surprise. His feet turned and pounded away in the direction of the creek; he ducked through the wire fence that separated the bike path from the large lots and houses behind it, estates that predated Villanueva and were owned by doctors. He felt the toad's heart beating inside his palm. It would be safe in the water, he thought. Now, where was he going to be safe?

Then there came a time when I lived in the king's forests and ate what I could steal from the bushes and the streams like an outlaw. I suppose that I was often cold, often hungry. I remember these things as facts, but they are faded, soft in my memory, like an old tapestry seen in firelight. My father led me into this life, a life for which he himself was particularly ill-suited. But my father had always seemed ill-suited to ordinary life as well.

My mother raised poultry, gardened, cooked, and sewed. We lived in her village. My father had come to Brenleah as a stranger the year I was born. His life since then had consisted of a singular path to and from the alehouse. He had his own table there and read or wrote for those who needed it enough to pay. It was well known that, although he would initially insist upon a payment of cash, he could be persuaded to accept drink instead. If no one came with contracts or letters, then he would find a way to drink anyway. Toward dusk, when his cup had been refilled many times, my mother would send me to lead him home. Holding my shoulder in a pretense of intimacy, but in fact to mask his unsteady feet, I could feel the long yellow nails of his hand catch in the cloth of my shirt. Then he might tell me, in a voice he wrongfully believed to be quiet and private, that the king was mad.

His words carried into the open doorway of our home. "What does it matter?" my mother might or might not answer. "The sun rises, the sun sets."

"Stupid, stupid woman!" I can see my father throw his arm out in a wide arc. "His forest, his road, his fields. Right outside our door."

My mother continues her work. Her hand dips and rises. She is mending a shirt, she is ladling soup, she pulls on the rope to raise water from our well, she brushes my sister's hair into braids for bedtime. We left the women behind the day we fled into the forest, and my father never seemed to care if we saw them again.

Eomund, the trader, told my father a party of King Halric's hunters were arriving to hunt for boar in the king's forest. We could already see

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their dust down the road, hear the hooves of their horses. They were riding fast.

"Hunters?" my father said. "Hunters?" His voice broke under the double strain of panic and drink. We fled immediately with only those things we carried every day, over the fence and into the double darkness of the night and the trees.

Of course, he was followed. A child sees a fence as a challenge more than a discouragement, and they had all been through this particular fence many times before. The man who owned the property had done everything he could to curtail this, had even called the police on two occasions. It was not that he disliked children, he told them, it was only that the boys upset the delicate ecological balance of the creek.

In the summer the creek evaporated entirely, exposing all manner of evidence to support his concern — pop cans, tennis balls, unmated socks, school papers carelessly or deliberately lost, and last year, a gruesome manifestation that turned out to be a headless doll.

But now the creek was filled with clean, new water and even the algae growth was confined to the very edges. Wystan slid down the creek bank on the seat of his pants, leaving a wide, flat, muddy slide behind him. He set the toad free and ran into the water, slipping once on the mud attached to his shoes. He was wet to the knees, and quite unpleasantly so, when he reached the other side, but he was too small, too awkward to keep his lead under ordinary circumstances. His only chance to escape seemed to lie in a direct route. He could hear Jason shouting behind him. His pursuers had just made the fence.

Up the bank and slightly to the left, on the very edge of the cultivated lawn, was a tree Wystan had found about a year ago when he was chasing fireflies. This tree had an unusual trunk that curved about an open space like a letter *C*. A child, anyone not too big, could squeeze through the opening and be surrounded on three sides by living wood. Wystan had a faint hope that he was the only one who knew this tree. He thought it possible that no one else had ever ventured so far into the property or gone so near the house. If he were wrong, he would be trapped inside with no back door.

The boys' voices behind him moved to his right. They were heading for the slender fallen trunk that bridged the creek. Wystan scrambled up the bank, panting noisily with his pant legs clinging wetly together every step. He sprinted for the tree and curled his body into it. Then he tried to quiet his panicked breathing, which pounded in his ears like the tree's own heart.

There were paths into the forest, but none went very deep and my fa-

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ther ignored them. Soon the trees stood so close together we had to break their branches to move between them. My father led us, urging me on often to follow more closely, apparently unaware that if I did this, I would take many stinging branches in the face and arms. Still, my father's speed surprised me. We might have run for more than an hour before he was spent and collapsed against a rock, gasping in air. He did not try to speak until his breathing had become more even.

"What now?" he asked despairingly. "What now?"

"Will we go back?"

"No." He shook his head, the hair damp at his temples and did not move. "We couldn't go back even if I could find the way. Which I couldn't."

"I could," I told him. "We left such a trail of broken branches, I could easily follow it home."

His eyes rolled back like a horse's, startled. "A trail? There must be no trail!" He rose heavily to his feet, gestured with one skinny hand for me to take the lead. "No trail," he repeated, and though I could feel his impatience with my slow progress, could feel it like a heat on my back, he said nothing more and took care in how he moved, stopping for several long minutes to untangle the material one of his sleeves had left on a branch. All his shirts were old and very soft.

Soon it was too dark to see at all, and we were forced to stop. My father wrapped his cloak around us both and took several long tugs on his flask without offering to share. I smelled his liquor and his sweat. I imagine I rested better than he did, though I awoke several times to strange noises. In addition to royal hunters, to royal beasts, and to ruthless outlaws, my mother had told me of the forests' unnatural occupants. In Brenleah when someone died, the corpse was beheaded to prevent it from rising and walking in the forest at night.

When dawn came I slipped out of my father's arms and followed the sounds of water to a pretty stream where I drank and washed. My father found me there. His eyes were red and caked, his hands shook in the cold water of the stream. He spoke, and the suspicion in his words surprised me. "Don't sneak away from me like that," he ordered harshly. "Every minute, I want to know where you are."

Over the sounds of his own breath, now successfully muffled, of his own heart, which refused to slow, Wystan heard an unfamiliar voice — male and authoritative. "I suppose you boys know you're trespassing?" it asked.

Enrique answered. "Sorry, mister. We were just playing a game."

Jason — God, Jason was much closer than Wystan had imagined—

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affected a tone of innocence. "We didn't hurt the creek, sir," he said.

"I'm sure there's been no harm done," the strange voice conceded. "Still, you know you're not welcome here. If I mention this to my uncle, he'll have the police out again. But —if you go home now, I might forget to mention it."

The voices retreated. Wystan heard Enrique saying thank you; it sounded distant. Minutes passed. Wystan closed his eyes. He was as safe as a bird in his tree. He was as comfortable as a squirrel, except for his sopping footwear. He smelled tree all around him. It was a lovely smell. Wystan felt moved to say thank you himself. He reached into his pocket for his Boy Scout knife. He had been a Cub once for about thirty minutes when his parents had hoped it might ease the way to social acceptability. He opened the blade and carved a large and wonderful *W* into the inner bark of the trunk.

He dropped the knife with a start. The strange voice he had heard in the distance was speaking to ***him***. "You can come out now," it said, then its tone changed. "What the hell are you doing to the tree?"

Wystan did not answer. He leaned forward, hugging his wet knees. He became a small and pitiable ball of a boy. It was not a plea a child would have responded to, but an adult might. Unfortunately the face that had appeared at the opening of the trunk was not clearly identifiable as one or the other. Older than Wystan, certainly. Lots older. But not old enough to be a parent or a teacher. The face was not looking at Wystan, anyway. It was focused on Wystan's *W*, an undeniably clean, new wound in the side of the tree. Wystan slid his left foot forward, ever so slowly, until it covered the open blade of his knife.

"What does the *W* stand for?" the young man asked. His voice hovered somewhere between the friendly, "You can come out now," and the hostile, "What the hell are you doing . . . ?"

"Wystan," Wystan said.

"That your name?"

Wystan nodded. When the man looked away again, he slid his right foot forward to cover the knife handle, although the *W* was still there and no one was going to believe he'd done it bare-handed. To Wystan the knife suggested premeditation.

The man was expressing his opinion of Wystan's name by whistling quietly. He shook his head. "Bet you hate it."

This was patently obvious. Wystan did not respond.

"You could tell them to call you Stan. That wouldn't be so bad. I know a couple of Stans."

This was stupid. He could *tell* them to call him Rex. What difference would telling them make? "It's a poet's name," he offered.

"So is William Williams. That's no

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excuse." The young man inserted a hand through the opening of the trunk. "I'm Carl," he said. Wystan shook Carl's hand; Carl withdrew it and his face disappeared. Wystan snatched up his knife, closing it and shoving it deep into his pocket. He wriggled his shoulders through the tree trunk, emerging on the grass at Carl's feet. Carl was lighting a cigarette. "Don't ever start smoking," Carl told him. "You already know that, right?"

Wystan nodded. Carl had a sharp nose, light brown hair, and gray eyes with enormous irises. He breathed out a stream of smoke, tapped on the cigarette with a fingernail. "You going to get home all right?" Carl asked.

Wystan shrugged.

"I could walk you."

"No, thanks." Wystan began to move in the direction of the fallen trunk bridge. If he crossed the creek there, then cut over two neighboring lots, he could emerge far down the bike path. He reached the top of the bank, then Carl called after him.

"Wystan? Stan?"

Wystan turned. "My uncle's in Europe," Carl said. "I'm watching his house for him. You can come back and play if you want to. Down at the creek or up here. It's O.K."

"O.K.," said Wystan.

"Don't carve up any more trees, though."

"O.K.," said Wystan. He picked his way down the creek bank, leaving no tracks, making no noise. He was a white man, stolen by Indians from his natural parents, trained in Indian ways, accepted by the tribe like a brother, loved by the chief like a son. He was on his name-walk, the ordeal that would make him a warrior, that would determine the secret name his tribe would have for him. Wystan crossed the bridge from one world into another with great expertise.

My one wish was to go home. I wept whenever I thought of my mother and sister, and I could have left my father at any time, but it would have been his death and I knew it. He had no idea what could be eaten safely and what would grow in the belly like a plague. He depended on me. I bound my knife to a branch and caught fish. I found nests with eggs in them. We talked about traps, but never had the food to spare for bait. My father grew skinnier; the meals clung to his beard but not to his body. He suffered from cramps in his stomach and his legs. One by one he broke the yellow nails on his fingers, but his hands were no more useful without them. His flask was empty. He was morose.

"Happiness," he said, "comes from doing what you are suited to do. I knew this happiness once. Long ago. Long ago."

"Let's go back," I pleaded.

"Never."

We lived in a cave some bear had

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abandoned to the fleas. They were glad of our company. We chose it for its depth. It had inner chambers and went back farther than we dared explore. One chamber held a surprise, a faded painting on its flattest wall. We examined it by torchlight. It showed a great beast driven to its knees by a slender stake that pierced its back and protruded from its chest. A small man danced before it, his arms and legs sticklike, delicate, but triumphant. I could not identify the beast with any assurance, a bear perhaps. A giant boar? I asked my father what he thought, but the subject held no interest for him. "We could retreat this far," he said. "If we needed to. We could put out the torches and still find our way out in the dark. And not be found ourselves, unless the cave were searched thoroughly."

We went back to our fire at the cave's mouth. I had started it with my father's strike-a-light; he continually put it out, worrying about the smoke. This night he was more relaxed. I had caught and cooked three fish; we sat and picked over their bones, watched the suggestive shapes of the flames on the cave walls. I heated water in my father's flask, not too hot, and made a weak tea out of bitter nuts, leaves, and fish bones. My father was thoughtful. "I suppose this is what prison would be like," he suggested. "Without the fire and the opening, of course. Would you go mad in the dark without them, do you think? So mad that light and freedom couldn't heal you?"

"Is it prison you're afraid of?" I asked him. He seemed so relaxed. I didn't expect an answer, but I was willing to risk the question. He didn't say another word.

We saw the sun directly only at noon. I'm not sure how many days passed. Not as many as I have made it sound, I suppose. A handful only. No seasons passed. The stars did not change their courses. My father began to teach me to read. I scratched the letters of my name in the dirt, and he corrected them. "I once taught a king's son," he said suddenly. "I was once well paid for these instructions."

"Halric," I guessed. Our young king.

"No. Cynewulf. His eldest brother. I taught him his letters. I taught him statecraft. When he became king I advised him in everything." I waited. A question from me would end the story. It might be ended in any case. But after a long silence, my father went on. "Cynewulf was a good king. He brought peace after a century of hostilities. He signed a treaty and sent Halric as a hostage to seal it."

"His brother?"

"Half brother. Different mother. Oh, Halric's mother was completely mad. Heard angels and devils. Dangerous woman. Removing Halric from her influence was one of the advantages to the treaty. And you mustn't

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think he was ill-treated. He took his own servants, had his own rooms. In cruelty, I doubt it compared with what we now suffer." My father scratched his own name above mine. His hands shook whenever he required small, controlled movements of them. "He was six years old. Who knew he would someday be king? An assassination, an accident, and the pox. Suddenly the boy has to be ransomed and brought back to rule. A boy who knows nothing of his own country, nothing of how to be a king, and worse, has inherited his mother's weakness." My father dropped his stick, rubbed out our names with his boots. He fell on his knees and howled suddenly like an animal. It surprised and frightened me. "And all he wants is revenge. Revenge on those who brought this peace we still enjoy." He collapsed on his side, curling his legs to his chest, his mouth slack with soundless weeping. He lay and rocked in the dust and never made a sound.

Carl had a cold. Carl got lots of colds. He sat on the lawn chair in full sun, and his skin, Wystan thought, had taken on a chilly hue. He had heard Wystan down by the creek and invited him up to the grass. "I looked up your name," he said. "You know every name has its own meaning. The story is hard to find, but the meaning is usually pretty accessible. Yours is Celtic and old. It's the name of a weapon, a particular sort of battle-ax." He blew his nose into a white Kleenex, dropped it with several others beside his chair. "I thought it might help. It's a warrior's name."

"What does Jason mean?"

"I can find out," said Carl, and the next day, same time, same place, he had. The lawn chair was in its reclining position, the tissues had been replaced by an untidy pile of library books. "Healer," Carl told him. "Jason means healer."

Wystan laughed an adult, ironic laugh.

"Not accurate?" said Carl. "Too bad. I was trying to find a picture of your ax, but the library here is pretty minimal." He pulled a large book onto his lap and opened it to the photographic plates. "Look here."

Wystan pulled his chair closer; Carl tilted the book in his direction. Various artifacts were shown, the fruits of a single grave. There was a Celtic penannular brooch, a cruciform brooch, a ring sword with a skeumorphic ring — whatever that was — and an iron strike-a-light.

"You like this old stuff?" Wystan asked.

"I like stuff even older." Carl dumped the book from his lap and fished up another. "Look at this," he said. "This is a cave painting. Cro-Magnon."

This plate was colored. Wystan examined the picture as best he could;

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the way Carl was holding it, it was upside-down to him. He thought it a rather clumsy drawing and said so. "I could do that."

Carl laughed excitedly. "You did do it." He bent forward in Wystan's direction. Wystan drew back. "You did!" Carl's voice was insistent. "I'm thinking of that *W* you left inside the tree. Same impulse, or so I imagine. 'I was here,' in four quick strokes." He fell back again, tapping the plate with his index finger. "The need to change the world is so basic — to mark it, to direct it. Anthropologists say these kinds of paintings may have covered the world once, everywhere humans lived. Only the ones protected somehow survived. And we're still doing it. Like your *W*. This is the challenge the small human makes to the large world — I will change you to suit me."

Wystan's *W* had been a *W* of celebration, a *W* offered in gratitude to the natural world, but he was reluctant to say so. He looked from the picture to Carl's sharp, thin face. Carl's eyes were closed. The veins branched over the lids like rivers, like roads.

"What a glorious vision of the world," said Carl. "And it's all come true. Except for the beast inside us. We can't quite eradicate that one. When are we human? When we deal with other men, when are we dealing with humans?"

• • •

We did not hear them come. My father was bent at the stream, drinking water from the cup of his hand. *The noon sun flashed off silver, and* he froze, water dripping from his fingers. His last thoughts were for me. "Run," he screamed. "Run!" And then he became a deer and his flank was opened by the blade of a ring sword. It dipped and rose. The man who wielded it had a torn sleeve, pinned together with my mother's brooch. I saw it and knew there was nothing to go back for.

So I ran. I made the cave and forced myself deeper and deeper, lightless inside it. My feet and my fingers led me to the inner chamber we had chosen, and I hid there and believed whole days were passing.

I heard them at the cave's entrance, faint voices whose words were indistinguishable. The voices continued a while, never growing louder, never coming closer, and then they were gone. I crouched and wept. Hours passed before I dared make my way out again; our fire was cold and the cave was empty. I heard birds and knew no humans were near. Still I went back to the inner chamber to hide awhile longer. This time I slept. I dreamed I saw the painting again, in full daylight, in full detail. I took the charred end of a used torch — I was moved to add to the painting, and I wrote the sign for my name under the drawing of the man. Then I erased it, dreamstyle, by having not done it. I

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put the mark under the picture of the felled beast instead and I woke up.

In that moment, and never since then, I faced the death of my family. There are some now who say it was inhuman not to seek revenge. They don't understand that I had stopped being human. I had no more fires; my father's strike-a-light and the flask for carrying water were gone. I became a beast and I gave myself over to the protection of the cave and the forest entirely. When I was taken out of the forest, it was by force. Everything inside me fought against it.

And I found that I had made a mistake. I was returned to Brenleah by those who discovered me. My mother and my sister still lived there, and they set about the formidable task of taming me.

Carl was leaving. The friendship he had offered Wystan, the haven he provided had lasted only a few weeks. Carl's uncle was returning ahead of schedule, and Carl was being put into a hospital. Wystan thought Carl was crying, but Carl said it was just another cold. "I want to stay out," he said, "as long as I can, but everyone else is in agreement. Villanueva is too wild for me. I need an absolutely human environment."

He and Wystan were standing together at the tree. Carl lit a cigarette. "No point in my quitting," he said, waving the match to extinguish it. "No matter what they say." He coughed and covered his mouth. His upper arm showed a large, blue bruise. "Back up," he said to Wystan. "So I don't cough on you. Don't come close at all."

"What's wrong with you?" Wystan asked. In another year he would have known better than to ask it, though he still would have wanted to know.

Carl tried to smile, more a baring of teeth than anything else. "I have the plague," he said. "I have a monkey disease." Smoke came from his mouth. "My uncle had a hell of a time finding a hospital that would take me." If the planners of Villanueva had known about Carl's condition, they would not have wanted him in Villanueva. They would have been relieved to know he was going. Wystan felt desperately sad.

"Will you get well?" he asked.

Carl's eyes glassed over. "Sure," he said. "Sure I will." He averted his face. "You better go home now."

Wystan left him in the shadow of the tree, holding his small flame to his mouth. Wystan slid toward the creek, knelt by the water, and watched long-legged bugs skate across it. The algae was spreading. A late toad hopped by his hand.

He was losing Carl to the humans. Wasn't that what Carl had said? Very well. He, Wystan, would not be human anymore. Wystan took three hops on his long back legs along the side of the creek. He heard the boys above him on the bike path and straight-

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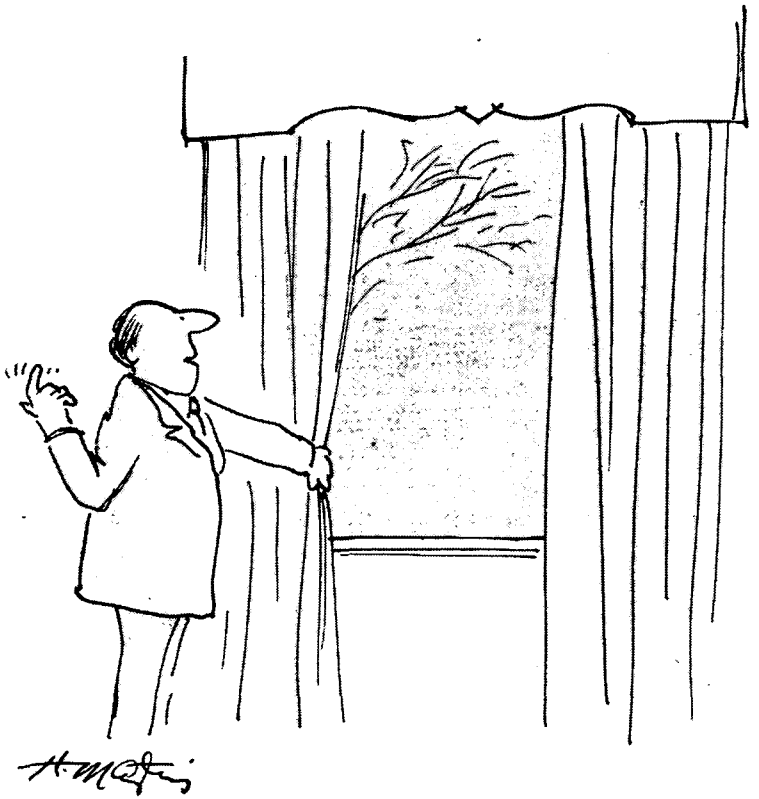
ened up hastily.

He would probably have to ask for swimming lessons again. He would have to spend the whole summer at the pool where the lifeguards were paid to protect him.



"Come take a look, Alice. I think the man in the moon is Boy George."

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Neil Hiller is a former Marine Corps officer and is self-employed as a reinsurance consultant. "'Peace Feelers,'" he writes, "will be my first published work of short fiction. I have co-written children's books with my wife, B.B. Hiller, one of which is a time travel piece, On the Far Side of the Mirror. *We are also finishing the novelization of the television show* The Best Times, *for Avon. "Peace Feelers" should be acceptable — as you will learn — "sight unseen."*

Peace Feelers

BY
NEIL W. HILLER

PRIVATE OMBRAY. I've been asked to dictate the after-action report about the New York Incursion Force, or NYIF, operation. I guess that means the whole mission failed, or at least nobody senior to me got back to tell about it. But nobody ever tells me anything. Personally, I think that our G-2 was no good . . . .

LIEUTENANT SHRACK. Just keep your observations about the Intelligence Section to yourself, Ombray. G-2 will do the analysis. You just do the telling.

OMBRAY. Aye, aye, sir. Anyway, Sergeant Dawlg and me had assignments near each other, so we were telelifted together into the Zone — which was not *supposed* to be a Hot Zone —for separate ground movement to our objectives. The plan was that Captain Jlok would be telelifted separately to his objective, which was the "lytehouse" under the main bridge.

Sergeant Dawlg and me knew there was supposed to be *some* unfriendlies in the area, but we weren't ready for the masses of people we sensed around us as we landed. At least I wasn't.

Dawlg nonchalanted it, though. This was probably just to show that he'd earned his campaign buzzers. He'd taken them off only last thing before we got into the telepositor so that no one could miss the fact that he was "salty."

The sergeant leaned his camouflaged two-meter oscillator against a nearby wall and stepped right in front of one of the locals we could hear going by. I got no idea how the guy avoided trampling Dawlg. "Do you know where Fourteenth Street is?" Dawlg asked the guy, polite as anything. "Yes," the civilian said as he stepped around Dawlg and went on

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toward wherever he was going.

I figured maybe the locals like simpler questions, so I stopped a female and asked: "Is this Fourteenth Street?" To which she replied, "Boatways."

I could feel Dawlg trying to cover his embarrassment about asking the wrong question by wide-range sensing, I guessed, for watercraft. Anyway, he told me there were no boats around, which I could tell as well as him. But we figured she'd been affirmative, and that meant we'd teleposited to the right "Z."

We also knew the camouflage gear was working 'cause we couldn't hear anyone doing any deep scanning past our surfaces.

Dawlg asked the next passerby if he was walking east. When the guy said, "Nope," Dawlg walked off in the opposite direction without saying another word to me. His assignment was to take out Big Alice, the main generator for the island on the eastern shore of the "Z." And that was the last I heard of him.

My job was just some routine Harassment and Indiction. G-2 had figured such H & I as blowing up an underground train would do the trick. I figured I might as well get started as just stand there soaking up the sound, even though it was an extremely soundy day.

Little did I know they were already onto us.

I was taking a step down to walk across the street to where I sounded the "subway entrance" when I felt a strong grip on my arm and was yanked backward by a tall, powerful man with a deep voice.

"Hey, Ombray, you tryin' to get yourself killed or what?" he asked, as I felt a car go by in front of us, making a sensational noise with a horn. But I couldn't figure how my "helper" knew my name if *their* G-2 wasn't better than ours.

SHRACK. It could have been a coincidence. Just skip the evaluations, Private.

OMBRAY. O.K. This guy isn't from their G-2, he's just carrying a ten-watt self-contained broadcast unit 'cause he likes the terrific vibrations I'm hearing. So he says to me, "Ain't you got no 'cane,' man?"

"No," I said, not knowing what he was talking about, though I figured I would have had a "cane" if G-2 had done . . . oh, forget it. Anyway, the guy went on, "Then we'd better *make* you a cane, you ignorant honkie."

SHRACK. Anything else strike you as strange about the language? I mean like having "honk*ee*" as an object for their verb "honk," apparently meaning, "person warned by a honk*er*"?

OMBRAY. So many I couldn't even keep track of them all. For instance, I found their use of the word "I," meaning "me," very confusing.

SHRACK. Go on.

OMBRAY. So the local says to me, "Gotta find an old car." He sets down

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the radio, says, "Keep an I on my sounds — I mean an ear," walks down the street, breaks an *antenna* off a parked car, walks back, and hands it to me. "Look," he says, "the heat asks you if you ripped that off, jus' tell 'em Brother Miranda gave it to you."

SHRACK. He was a *chaplain*?

OMBRAY. Must have been. Figured it was why he didn't have me put in the brig. Anyway, Brother Miranda strolls off accompanied by the sounds of his portable orchestra, and leaves me standing there feeling hundreds of signals from transmitters all over through the *artificial* antenna *he* figured I was supposed to have, and G-2—

SHRACK. Ombray!

COLONEL BRINT. Let him talk, Mr. Shrack. Go on, Private.

OMBRAY. Thank you, sir. G-2 has folded and taped down my own two perfectly good antennae under the camouflage where I can't use them. I was really glad to have Brother Miranda's "field expedient," but before I could get across the street holding the aerial up high for *great* reception, a female walks up close behind me, grabs me by the elbow, hustles me the rest of the way, and stops when we step up out of the street. "What, d'ja lose the rest of your 'umbrella'?" She seems to be joking at first, but gets serious right away. "You should have a, something, I, Dawlg."

I'm petrified.

She'd gotten me and the Sergeant mixed up, but the thing was, she *knew* about us. . . .

SHRACK. Incredible.

BRINT. Shrack, do you have a leak in your section? Find it today and report back to me. Go on, Private.

OMBRAY. Well, I didn't know what to tell this female G-2, so I got ready to give her my name, rank, and serial number, figuring I'd be shot anyway, since *our* G-2 hadn't let us wear uniforms. I said, "I'm *Ombray*, not Dawlg, I know no Dawlg. I'm Private Ombray, four, niner—"

"Foreigner," she interrupted, "and 'blind,'" — that's the word she used, unless I missed it — "crossing Fourteenth Street in traffic against the, 'something.' . . .

SHRACK. What?

OMBRAY. I remember. It was "lyte." I asked her about it, and she felt to me to be embarrassed. She said, "Sorry. I guess that doesn't mean much to you." Her explanation didn't make things any less noisy, but at least I hadn't made another mistake. Anyway, that's when I began to figure they were telepathic.

SHRACK. Telepathic?

OMBRAY. Yes. The next thing she says, more to herself than to me, is, "Beam me aboard, Scotty," and then, "I'm doing the best I can, Captain." She was not talking on a two-way.

SHRACK. Are you saying they knew about our telelifters by telepathy, Ombray?

OMBRAY. I sure am. How else could

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they hear what they heard and know what they *all* apparently knew about me and Dawlg and the mission? In fact, the next thing she said was, "*You* should try the lytehouse while you still can — you *do* know about the lytehouse, the place where a person like you can get help."

BRINT. Shrack, you realize that if they knew about Ombray and Dawlg and about Jlok's mission to destroy the "great gray bridge" by planting a two-meter oscillator in the "little red lytehouse" underneath, then they knew we'd compromised the disembossed encryption structure of the "books" that your reconnaissance people brought back to us.

SHRACK. Yessir.

BRINT. Find that leak, Mr. Shrack. Private, it looks like we set you up and lost two other good grunts because I've had poor resonance in my own G-2 section. If the general doesn't relieve *me* for this snafu, I'll get to the bottom of it. You're gonna be decorated for your bravery, Ombray. And *you* could get an unaccompanied tour to the palladium pits on Grognak Six, Mr. Shrack. Go on, Ombray.

OMBRAY. Thank you, sir. What happened next was that their G-2 lady showed me how to use the antenna as a sort of a feeler to get down the stairs by sending *myself* tapping signals. It works pretty well — if you go slow. She was talking very loud to me, kind of like she thought it would help me to understand better at higher volume.

SHRACK. Not very smart, for people with telepathy.

OMBRAY. Anyway, when we got downstairs, she yelled in my ear, "Do you have a token?"

Oh, cacophony, I thought, am I missing something *else* I'm supposed to have? As it turned out, she actually helped me to get past the officer guarding the gate to the underground train I was supposed to blow up.

BRINT. Ombray, they have *officers* on guard duty?

OMBRAY. No offense, sir, but not very good ones either. When she said something about "dumb, blind foreigner," — and I don't know why she thought I was dumb, because I'd sure talked to her — the guard officer said, "Come here, son," and *held the gate open for me.*

BRINT. Private, are you sure you're telling this straight?

OMBRAY. Absolutely, sir. But if you don't believe that, you're really going to have a hard time when I tell you *he* guided me down the next flight of stairs to where someone, apparently an enlisted guy, said, "I'll take him from here, Officer."

I had the funny feeling it was all coordinated. Like they all knew something obvious about me and were trying to help me get the mission done.

BRINT. That doesn't make any sense, Ombray.

OMBRAY. Sure it does, Colonel. These

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guys are peaceful, helpful people. They seemed sad — I *felt* their sadness for me. It was like I didn't share something great, something wonderful that they had and I didn't. If I was going to blow some of them up, well, they just were going to make it as easy as possible.

BRINT. Fantastic. Telepaths and fatalists, too.

OMBRAY. Well, sir. It seemed so — if "fatalist" means what I think. Anyway, "Which one you want?" the enlisted guy asked me. "Just a train," I said. "That's the *Aye* train," he corrected me, and led me down the platform. "Stand here. It's coming now, just one stop away." Since I couldn't hear the train myself, I figured their sensing was even better than ours — at least with our antennae taped down. Then he walked away, didn't even try to talk me out of the mission.

BRINT. You were on the platform with the detonator, and the unfriendlies were helping you? Why the hell *didn't* you accomplish the mission, Ombray?

OMBRAY. Because I couldn't, Colonel. I know I was supposed to, but how could I blow up people who helped me like that? I figured I'd be court-martialed if I didn't succeed, and couldn't live with myself if I did — so when I heard the train approaching, I stood on the very edge of the platform and got ready to jump.

SHRACK. This's a bit melodramatic, Ombray. The colonel's going to have you decorated, not shot. How about skipping the histrionics?

BRINT. Shut up, Shrack.

OMBRAY. Someone grabbed me and wrestled me to the ground. It was the guard-officer. "The lady said you was going to the lytehouse, and I remembered you was not gonna get there on the West Side train. Good thing I came down here to point ya' in the right direction. I'm gonna call Bellevue and have 'em come and get you, son."

I didn't know who Bellevue was, but I told him, "It's O.K., Officer. I'm not going to damage the train, I don't care what they do with me."

"It ain't the train I'm worried about, son," he said. "Ain't no way for you to hurt the train. But don't you know the train can hurt you? There ain't no reason for you to give up in this town, of all places. New York's the only place in the world where people'll help you more if you're 'blind' than Iffyukansee."

SHRACK. I think that's a town in New Jersey, Colonel.

BRINT. Shut up, Lieutenant. So the train was booby-trapped. That's why they weren't worried about your mission, Ombray. They figured if you went through with it, it was you who would get hurt by the train, and not the other way around.

OMBRAY. I don't think so, sir. Anyway, I managed to persuade the officer I was all right, and he didn't call in "Bellevue." He guided me all the way

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back up to the street and left me there. I went to the rendezvous point and waited for Dawlg and Jlok.

When they didn't come, I stripped off the topside camouflage, signaled, and was teleposited back here to the ship.

BRINT. What do you think happened to the others?

OMBRAY. I figured the sound shielding around the field oscillators the others were carrying wasn't up to fooling the unfriendlies' detection devices — that our guys were stopped and captured, or taken out.

SHRACK. That gees with their open radio broadcast, sir. They've called our Cosmarines "terrorists" and killed both of them. Someone seems to be covering up for us, too, because, the radio says, someone else has "claimed credit" for the missions.

Why didn't they get you, Ombray?

OMBRAY. The detonator was probably too small for them to care about. They just neutralized me with their telepathy.

SHRACK. I think it was something else. Some signal-enhancing neurobiological sense that we don't hear in them.

BRINT. That's fring bait, Shrack. I've got a private believing in a psychic defense system and a leaky G-2 who's explaining bad intelligence work by inventing a fifth sense to neglect along with the four he obviously isn't using already.

Classify this tape, Shrack; do the paperwork to get Ombray his heroism buzzer, and I'll sign. And we all better hope like hell the general doesn't hear into this. Ombray, you're dismissed.

Shrack, when you've got Ombray's leave papers cut and he's somewhere where the general can't clap ears on him, jettison Brother Miranda's goddamn cane, will you.

It's bad enough these people can defeat us without half trying, let alone accepting their feelers — before we can fire a shot.

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David Garnett has not appeared in F & SF *for a number of years; "Still Life" marks a welcome return. In it he shows us that there, indeed, is "more to life" than success in one's career.*

Still Life

BY

DAVID S. GARNETT

As the armour-plated limousine drew up outside the National Gallery, Corinne glanced out of the window toward the shattered stump of Nelson's Column. The scene always sent a chill up her spine. It was almost a decade since the monument had been toppled by a terrorist bomb. Why hadn't it been rebuilt? Instead, Trafalgar Square had become another of the city's no-go areas, its roads blocked off by army barricades and concrete gun posts.

Only rarely were the roads opened, and Corinne supposed she ought to feel priveleged that the military were prepared to allow vehicle access to the gallery today. But it was nothing to do with her, she realized; although it might be the Corinne Dewar Exhibition, she was by no means the most important person who'd be there. By tomorrow, when there were no guests invited for the opening, the only way in would be on foot again.

"Ready?" asked Robert.

Corinne glanced at him and nodded. She smiled briefly, looking him up and down. He seemed so strange in his old-fashioned suit, the formal black jacket and trousers, the crisp white shirt and ridiculous bow tie. She was glad her own choice of outfit wasn't so restricted — she wore a calf-length white leather skirt and black satin blouse, although both were covered by a thick simulated fur coat.

The driver opened the passenger door, and Corinne climbed out onto the patch of pavement that had been cleared of snow. Robert followed, and together they walked up the wide steps toward the gallery, squeezing between the barbed wire and sandbags, trying to ignore the flak-jacketed troops, their rifles held at the ready.

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"Nervous?" said Robert.

"Not really," Corinne replied. She felt distanced from all of this, as though it weren't happening to her, as though she were a spectator watching at home on her television screen.

"I am," Robert said, taking her arm as they reached the entrance and the last of the soldiers. Inside, security would be handled by the police.

The National Gallery, said Corinne to herself, the . . . National . . . Gallery. Her own major retrospective exhibition at the National, and she wasn't even dead yet. She tried to keep her face straight for the television crew waiting for her just inside the foyer. She'd had exhibitions before, of course, all over the world and too many to count. In London, there had even been the Hayward Gallery a couple of years ago. But this was the big one, the sign that she had arrived and been accepted as the nation's top living artist.

"Miss Dewar," said the television interviewer, as the cameras and microphones were aimed at her. "Can you tell us how you feel to be here today?"

Corinne paused, and as Robert moved away and out of camera range, she wondered how exactly she did feel.

She wasn't certain. She had been so delighted and elated at first, but by now, after all the preparation, she felt numb. About half of her works from the previous two decades had been assembled here under one roof, probably the only time that would ever happen. The only time while she was still alive, that was for certain.

Her name was already spoken of in the same terms as the greatest of British painters, Turner and Constable. It was all hype, Corinne was well aware, but it was very nice for people to say it was true. And she was only thirty-nine years old.

"It feels," she answered slowly, as she glanced around the huge entrance hall and saw all the reproductions of her work for sale, from postcards to posters, "pretty good." She tossed back her long auburn hair and smiled for the cameras.

"Can you tell us, Miss Dewar," said the reporter, "which is your favorite painting?"

She was tempted to answer the Mona Lisa, but this was no time for jokes. It was an old question, and one she was tired of. She gave her most frequent answer. "The next one," she said, with a hint of laughter.

The reporter nodded and smiled back. "And which is your favorite in this exhibtion?"

"That's hard to say," she replied and it was. Whatever she chose, it would be wrong. Every one of her paintings was a portrait, and so many of her subjects would be here today — and they would all believe their own picture was the best. It had become quite a status symbol to be painted by Corinne Dewar. The rich, the famous, the cream of *Who's Who*

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must have sat for her over the years.

She could tell that she wouldn't be able to evade the question. The best solution was to choose the most popular subject, and that meant the royal family. But who? The three-year-old heir to the throne? Or the late king? Corinne had painted the monarch only a few months before the assassination. Or the new king with his popular young bride?

"I think it must be the coronation portrait of His Majesty," she said.

"It was a great honor for me to be asked to paint the portrait, of course, it isn't only that," said Corinne. "The country — indeed the whole world — is going through a bad time. The king represents all that is best in Britain, and he's a symbol of the nation, showing that we can all pull through these troubles and that the country will once more be safe and at peace."

Corinne noticed Robert watching her, grinning sardonically, and she glanced away.

"Thank you, Miss Dewar," said the reporter, and he stepped aside to allow Corinne to pass through.

Robert caught up with her, but said nothing.

There were several galleries devoted to the exhibition, and all eyes were turned toward Corinne as she entered the first hall; There was a brief flutter of applause. Five hundred invitations had been sent out, and there already seemed that number present. The more important guests, the most famous of those Corinne had painted, were due to arrive shortly. Meanwhile, the others paid more attention to the champagne than to the canvases that hung on the walls around them.

Over the next hour, Corinne greeted the new arrivals and those already present, shaking hands and accepting kisses on the cheek and hand, seeing in the flesh again so many people whom she could now remember only as paint on canvas. She seldom recalled her subjects; all she was ever concerned with was their faces. Politicians and diplomats, sportsmen and actresses, industrialists and millionaires, aristocrats and finally the Queen Mother herself, and Corinne curtsied and accepted the royal gloved hand.

"So good to see you again, my dear," the Queen Mother said, although her eyes passed straight through Corinne.

Corinne had painted her when she was the queen, shortly before her husband's sitting. She had heard that the first portrait was a trial run and that if the king hadn't approved, he would not have allowed Corinne to paint him.

The Queen Mother looked hardly any different from those days six years ago. "I did so adore your picture of my grandson," she said. "I have a copy of it in my bedroom."

Corinne could only nod and smile,

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not sure what she should say. She was used to meeting the famous only when they sat for her, and she seldom spoke while painting. Most of her subjects soon gave up trying to converse, while others thought it was beneath them to talk to her. That suited Corinne fine. She wasn't interested in talking; it was too much of a distraction. All she ever needed to say were things like "Head up" or, "Look to the right a little more."

The Queen Mother didn't spend much time in the exhibition, only long enough to walk once around the galleries, studying the catalog more than the pictures themselves. And once she had gone, many more of the guests felt it wasn't worth staying. They were here to be seen, not to see Corinne's paintings.

As the halls emptied and only a few dozen remained, Corinne wandered at random around the exhibition. Every single picture was a portrait, totally representational, almost all of them done on commission — they weren't subjects she would have chosen herself; they were simply jobs of work. There were very few of them she could identify with, and those only the very earliest. It was her exhibition, but they were no longer her paintings; she didn't own any of them.

Two years ago a painting she had done six years previously had been sold for half a million new pounds. Corinne hadn't seen a penny of it. All the picture had meant to her was five thousand pounds at the time, enough to live on for a while.

She noticed the painting through the archway in the next hall, hanging in an elaborate gilt frame all by itself. It was worth a lot of money, so it was deemed to be a better picture. Corinne walked through the doorway and toward the painting. It was of a famous actor, a man who had become a Peer of the Realm because of his portrayals of Shakespearean characters. He was dead, but his image lived on. It was his widow who had paid so much for the picture, buying it from the theater owner who had commissioned his most famous actor in his most famous role, Hamlet. Corinne had seen the play but had not been impressed by the performance. When the widow had died last year, the painting had ended up in the Tate Gallery in part payment toward taxes.

It was a good painting, Corinne conceded detachedly, but certainly no better than any other of hers. Since the half-a-million-pound sale, her work had become even more in demand. What better investment was there than giving an artist twenty-five thousand pounds for a canvas that could be worth twenty times that price? Robert had begun adding to each contract of commission a clause that guaranteed Corinne a percentage of the painting's resale value.

"Half a million quid for that old ham?" said a voice from behind Corinne. "I wouldn't give a fiver for it!"

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She spun around and found herself face to face with the prime minister.

"By that reckoning," the man continued, his eyes sparkling, "my picture ought to be worth a thousand million!" He looked from the picture and toward the artist.

"Hello, Corinne," he said, offering his hand.

"Hello, Graham," said Corinne as they shook hands. "Sir Graham, I mean. I didn't know you were here."

"Call me Graham, since we're old friends," he said with a wink, still holding her hand. "No, I sneaked in without paying when everyone else was leaving." He glanced around the gallery. "It's certainly an impressive show, Corinne. You must be very proud."

"Yes," she said, managing to free her hand from his grip. "I must be."

The prime minister had been one of her first major commissions, a dozen years ago. In those days he'd been plain Graham Anderson, deputy leader of the Opposition. He'd been very charming and witty, and the sitting had taken three days, throughout which he tried to persuade Corinne to go out with him. The final day, they'd gone to a small Malaysian restaurant, and afterward he'd seduced her. He phoned several times over the following weeks, but she never returned the calls. They hadn't met again until now.

The man raised his eyebrows. "What is it? You've reached the top and you think: Now what? I know the feeling."

Corinne shook her head. "No, it isn't that." She shrugged. "I don't know what it is" Then she smiled, quickly glancing around to see where Robert was, hoping he'd come and rescue her. There was no sign of him, and slowly she began walking toward the next gallery. Sir Graham stayed with her.

"It's been too long since I've seen you, Corinne," he said, and she could almost believe him; but the man was a politician, and so he always sounded convincing.

Corinne saw Sir Graham's portrait, and she led him in that direction.

"What a handsome chap," said the prime minister, staring up as they stopped by the four-foot-square canvas. "Who is he?" He peered at the name engraved on the brass plate at the bottom of the frame. "Why . . . it's me!" he said in mock surprise.

Corinne couldn't help but smile at his antics.

"You must come around to No. 10 for a meal next week," he said.

"I seem to have heard that line before."

Sir Graham studied her doubtful expression. "No, Corinne, I mean it. Come and meet my wife; she'll be delighted to see you. Got your pictures of the bloody royal family pinned up everywhere, she has." He shook his head despairingly. "What do you say? I'd like to talk to you."

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"Talk, just talk?" she asked.

He nodded.

"Pity!"

They both laughed.

Sir Graham turned his back on the portrait, standing in front of it, holding his head at the same angle and assuming an identical pose. "Does it look like me?"

Corinne looked at the picture, then at the prime minister, then at her painting again.

"Yes," she said, slightly surprised. "It looks exactly like you."

As they lay in bed that night, Corinne said to Robert: "Why?"

He knew what she meant, it was a discussion they'd had many times; but they'd never reached a conclusion. Robert said nothing for a minute as he stared out of the window, from the few scattered points of starlight above and down to the darkened streets of London below.

They had been together eighteen years, ever since they had been students at the Royal College of Art. Sometimes Corinne believed that Robert must resent her success; he hadn't touched a brush himself in over a decade.

But what Corinne couldn't understand was why she should have succeeded where so many others had failed. Because her work was different, Robert told her. Perhaps that was true — but what she was doing was no different from what the portrait painters of four or five centuries ago had done.

Who needed portraits anymore? Not when there were photographs and holograms. Her whole painting life had been dedicated to the exact reproduction of facial characteristics. That was imitation, not art — art wasn't there to imitate life. She never felt inspired to do better, because that wasn't required. Those who commissioned her wanted a frozen moment in time captured forever on canvas.

The reporter had asked her which her favorite picture was — but to her they were all the same. She could hardly differentiate between them. Her earlier work, say fifteen years ago, hadn't been so polished; but now, she knew, she had reached perfection — and had been turning out the same product over and over again for years.

It was what people wanted, and she wondered why.

"Because it's the times we live in," answered Robert, sliding his arm beneath her neck. "People can't understand what is happening to them and to the world; they want a return to the days when things were simple and easier to understand. A portrait is a portrait. None of your modern art — modern being anything later than 1900. There's nothing wrong with them wanting that, nothing wrong with you giving it to them."

But there was, thought Corinne, there was.

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Seeing so much of her work on display side by side had brought home to her how alike it all was. She'd spent twenty years repeating herself, and it seemed that she never really thought about it. She simply did it unconsciously, like breathing. And without realizing, her life had been slipping away.

She and Robert had never married; there hadn't seemed any point. Neither had there been any children. Who needed them? And by now it was almost too late.

Robert had become her manager and agent, but they seldom discussed her work. What was there to talk about? Someone sat for her, and she painted a portrait, an absolute likeness.

"Why haven't you ever let me paint you?" Corinne asked. It was a subject she hadn't considered for years.

"I can't afford it," said Robert.

"I'm being serious."

"Why do you want a picture of me when you've got the real thing here?" He kissed her cheek. When she didn't respond, he added: "Painting me would be like bringing your work home with you. And business and pleasure don't mix, or so the story goes."

"I think . . . ." Corinne paused.

"Do you? I often wondered about that."

"I think," she repeated, ignoring him, "that it's about time I stopped painting portraits." She waited for Robert's reaction, but he remained silent. "I want to change my style, do something different. I'm fed up with tycoons and debutantes. I want to do abstracts. I want to do laser sculptures. I want to draw patterns in the sand for the tide to wash over. We can afford it, can't we? We could retire for a few years. If it doesn't work out, I can always go back to what I've been doing. What do you think? Robert? what do you think?"

"You're serious, aren't you?" he said after so long that she thought he wasn't going to answer.

"Yes. What do you think?"

"It's the best thing I've heard you say in ten years."

She stared at him in the moonlight, then rolled over on her side and hugged him close.

"Well . . . almost the best thing."

"Oh, Robert," she whispered, "I love you."

"Glad to hear it," he said and they kissed.

Half an hour later, Corinne said: "I saw the prime minister at the exhibition."

"Uh-huh," mumbled Robert, almost asleep.

Corinne's one night with Graham Anderson was the only time she had been unfaithful to Robert. Robert didn't know about it, and she had no intention of telling him. He'd had two or three flings, Corinne was well aware, but nothing serious. She had never questioned him or let on that she knew. He had stayed with her, and

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that was what mattered.

"He invited me to Downing Street for a meal."

"Uh."

"Will you come if I go?"

Robert turned and rubbed his eyes. "I can't stand the bastard," he said, yawning.

"He's the best prime minister we've got."

"Great. I didn't vote for him."

"Not many people did."

"I know. But he gets elected. Whatever happened to democracy? Call this a free country?"

"No one's called it that for a long time," Corinne pointed out. "Anyhow, will you come to dinner?"

"Do I have to? He probably wants you to do his portrait again."

"Then I'll need you there to talk business. You're supposed to be my manager."

"And you've given up portraits," said Robert. "Remember? Changed your mind already?"

"No, I haven't. And Graham Anderson doesn't need another portrait. He stood in front of the painting I did of him, and he looked exactly the same. That was twelve years ago, and he doesn't seem to have aged a day. He must be in his mid-fifties by now, but he doesn't look it."

"Must be one of those immortals." Robert sat up and leaned back against the headboard. "He probably is, come to think about it. It makes sense, him being the prime minister."

"What do you mean?"

Robert scratched his head. "You must have heard the rumor going around a few years ago, about a treatment for prolonging life?" He glanced at Corinne, but she shook her head. "No?" he said. He shrugged. "Well, there was this story that immortality had been discovered — but naturally it was being kept for the rich, for the people in power. People like the Right Honorable Sir Graham Anderson, prime minister."

"But it would have been on television."

"Oh, Corinne, you're so naive sometimes. This is England, woman. The only country in the world that doesn't have laws prohibiting its people from doing things — it has laws that permit them to do things."

Corinne wasn't really listening. She was thinking about the Queen Mother, and how she didn't seem to have aged, either; but that was only six years, she supposed. "Would the royal family be included in this conspiracy of yours?" she asked.

"Of course."

"Then how come the king is dead, the last king."

"The king is dead," said Robert. "Long live the king. The answer is simple: Even being immortal isn't much protection when your state coach and you inside get blown up into millions of tiny pieces."

"You don't believe all that, do you?" Corinne said. "About some

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people being immortal?"

"You must be joking." Robert slid down under the duvet again. "It must be nice, though," he added sleepily, "to live forever."

Corinne remembered all the paintings that had lined the walls of the National Gallery, only a part of her output over the past two decades. To live forever?

"I can't think of anything worse," she said.

Robert didn't join Corinne when she accepted the prime minister's invitation, and Sir Graham arranged for her to be picked up by helicopter and taken to Chequers, where he was spending the weekend discussing the new emergency regulations. Corinne was surprised that the rest of the inner cabinet didn't stay for dinner; when they sat down at the table, there were only three of them — herself; Sir Graham; and his wife, Lady Carole.

They spoke of everything and nothing, but all the time Corinne couldn't help thinking what Robert had told her about immortality. Neither of the other two looked as old as she knew they were. They both seemed to be about forty.

Corinne tried to dismiss the idea. Lots of people appeared younger than their age, and Corinne believed that she was a good example. She'd looked after herself, was careful what she ate, took plenty of exercise. In a favorable light, she reckoned she could pass for thirty. But the older people became, the harder it was to disguise the years — and Graham certainly didn't look fifty-four.

The meal was excellent. There was certainly no food shortage here, and quite exotic fare at that — fresh salmon, followed by venison. Corinne hadn't eaten such rich food in years. And after the different wines and liquors, she was feeling light-headed when they went into the study and sat down in the plush leather armchairs in front of the blazing log fire.

Lady Carole excused herself after a few minutes, and Corinne was alone with Sir Graham. She smiled as the flames warmed her face. After a few drinks, her earlier thoughts about the man's age seemed ridiculous.

"You kept looking at me in an odd way before, Corinne," he said. "What were you thinking about? The last time we met?"

"At the National Gallery?"

He shook his head, smiling softly. "You know what I mean." He stood up and took a cigar from the box on top of a carved bureau in the corner, then lit it as he sat down again. There was silence for a while as they watched the logs burn. "The night you finished my portrait," he added.

"Twelve years ago," Corinne reminded him.

"Was it that long?" Sir Graham stared at the paneled wall beyond

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her. "I suppose it must be." He hesitated, as though unsure of his words. "Do you think I've altered?"

"Altered?"

"Since you painted me?"

"What makes you ask that?" she said suspiciously. It was almost as if he could read her mind. Had he stood in front of his portrait so that she could see he was no different? It couldn't be, that was ridiculous.

The prime minister smiled instead of replying. "Would you like another drink?"

Corinne shook her head.

"It's true, you know," Sir Graham continued. "I've hardly changed. Two years after you painted me, I had —er — had an operation, a certain treatment to stop me from aging." He was watching Corinne, waiting to observe some reaction.

"Cosmetic surgery, you mean?"

"No. Longevity. Perhaps even immortality."

Corinne looked away from him and stared into the fire. She felt confused and wished she hadn't had so much to drink, but she didn't doubt that Sir Graham was telling the truth.

"Why are you telling me this?" she asked, after a few seconds.

"I wanted you to know that it works, that there's nothing to fear or worry about."

She glanced at him, not understanding what he meant.

"I'm offering you the chance of having the same treatment, Corinne. Would you like to join the elite, be one of us, and become immortal?"

She shook her head slowly, in disbelief rather than rejection. She could accept the idea of immortality, that there had been some secret medical breakthrough; it was entirely possible. But . . . but . . . .

"Why me?" she asked. She frowned. "Because of that one night twelve years ago?"

The man laughed, then sighed. "No, Corinne, not because of that." He drew on his cigar and studied the glowing tip. "Let me explain. When I first became a Member of Parliament, I heard a story about immortality. I didn't believe it could be true, but gradually I realized that this treatment did exist. A process had been found to prevent old age; the secret of eternal youth — call it what you will. But it was in the hands of those who held the real power in this country, not their puppet politicians like me. I decided to change all that."

As he paused, Corinne asked: "How?"

The prime minister shook his head and smiled without humor; he wasn't going to say. "Things are a little different now. Wealth and influence are no longer the main qualification — perhaps because everyone rich or powerful enough has already been treated. But I want to offer the opportunity to the nation's finest talents, our scientists and composers and poets . . . and artists. You're too valu-

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able for your skills to be allowed to die. What do you say, Corinne?"

She said nothing — she was having enough trouble thinking clearly. Her mind was filled with flashes of brief ideas that set her brain reeling. This was crazy. Sir Graham was offering immortality as casually as a glass of brandy.

"The treatment arose out of cancer research back in the 1980's," the prime minister added. "The original experimental rats are still alive forty years later. It works equally well with humans, and with no significant side effects. There is complete cell renewal in all bone and tissue, even brain cells."

"And . . . and you're offering this to me?"

"Yes."

"But . . . uh . . . I mean . . . what will it cost me?"

"Nothing." He laughed briefly. "It's the only thing you can still get on the National Health."

"What about Robert?" she asked suddenly.

Sir Graham knew at once whom she meant. "The man you live with?" He shook his head. "I'm afraid not, Corinne. We have to restrict it to a few people, and he's not . . ."

He shrugged his shoulder. "Well, he's not one of them."

"Because he isn't rich? Is that what you mean?" She couldn't accept, not if the treatment wasn't available to Robert. "What if we were married?"

The prime minister shook his head again. "I realize it's a difficult decision, but if you —

"What about your wife?" Corinne interrupted. "She's had it done, hasn't she? Like you. Why should she be any different from Robert?"

Sir Graham held up his hand to stop her tirade. "I don't want to hear any more about this Robert," he said calmly. "Furthermore, you won't discuss this with him or anyone else. What I have told you is in the strictest confidence."

He didn't need to threaten any reprisal; his cold eyes were all the warning Corinne needed.

"Don't take too long reaching a decision. You can have a couple of weeks to consider it."

Corinne rose to her feet. "I can give you my answer now," she said. She would not say yes, not without Robert.

Sir Graham held up his hand once more. "Don't be too hasty," he told her. "I've asked you once, and that's all. If you refuse, then it's final." He stubbed out the cigar, then added for emphasis: "And you will die. You might live another thirty or forty years, growing old and feeble and senile, but you will die. Think about it, Corinne, think about it."

Corinne stood naked in front of the full-length mirror on the bedroom wall, examining herself, trying

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to remember herself twenty years ago — and wondering how she would look in another twenty years.

Twenty years wasn't long at all.

And time was crueler to a woman than a man. Would Robert still love her when her skin was loose and wrinkled, her hair gray, her face thin, her stomach fat . . . ? Already she had noticed the way that he looked at other women — younger women. He was still very handsome, tall and slim, but the years would take their toll on him as well. But men seemed to age so much more easily than women. They didn't live as long, there were more old women than old men, but what consolation was that? Corinne didn't want to grow old, and she didn't want to die.

But how could she live, accept the treatment, then watch as Robert grew older and frailer, until he finally died while she remained the same? The answer was simple: She couldn't.

She had known and loved Robert for so long, he meant more to her than anything else in the world . . . than everything else in the world. She couldn't give him up. She wouldn't want to live without him, which she'd have to do if she accepted the treatment and Robert couldn't have it.

What was the point of living forever if it meant being alone? Corinne could still remember how it had been before she met Robert, the endless lonely days and the even longer lonely nights.

The cost of eternity was too high. She would give up everything, even the offer of infinite tomorrows, for Robert, because without him she was only half alive.

She didn't regret any of the years she had spent with Robert. They'd had their problems and their arguments, but on the whole their relationship had improved with time. She looked forward to spending the rest of their lives together.

There was no need to tell Graham Anderson of her decision. If she didn't get in touch, then he would realize she believed her first instincts were correct and that she'd refused his offer. That night, as they held each other close, Corinne said to Robert: "Tomorrow I'm going to start my final portrait. I don't want any objections or discussion — because I'm going to paint you."

Robert opened his mouth to speak, but she put her hand across his lips.

"Don't say anything," Corinne told him. "All you have to do is nod your head."

Robert did as he was told; he nodded his head.

"Good," said Corinne. "That's settled. It'll be my last and my best."

She tried not to think about why she wanted a portrait of Robert, but was aware it was because as the years went by she would have a permanent reminder of him as he was now — before he had grown old. But for the same reason, she had no intention of

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doing a self-portrait. Corinne had never painted herself — she didn't want to remember how she had been, not when the mirror showed her the way she was now. The idea had not been very pleasant in the past, but for the future it seemed even more frightening, forever taunting her with the opportunity of immortality — which she had thrown away.

"And when I've finished," Corinne concluded, "we're going to go on a holiday. A long tour of the world, visit some of the places we've never seen — while they still exist."

The portrait was the most difficult Corinne had painted in years. Perhaps it was so hard to capture Robert on canvas because she knew him too well, or it was because they were in an entirely different relationship during the sessions. It took much longer than she had anticipated.

"I'm not surprised no one ever asks you to paint them twice," Robert had said on the first day. "It's so boring sitting here. At least you could talk to me."

"Move your arm back where it was," Corinne had replied.

"I'm glad I'm not paying for this," he'd complained, shifting his elbow half an inch along the arm of the chair.

Half of the work of a painting was done when the subject had left; she worked directly with oils on a prepared canvas. When she was alone and without distraction, she could concentrate on the more detailed work of the background and clothing. It looked more natural to follow what should have been there rather than what she'd actually seen. She could invent the texture of cloth and the way it hung, imagine the shadows where it was folded and creased, far more authentically than it ever appeared in real life.

Finally, on the fifth day, Corinne said: "That's it. You can go now."

"Thank God for that." Robert stood up and stretched, rubbing at the back of his neck. He began to walk toward the easel. "Can I take a look?"

"No." She hadn't allowed him to see what she'd done yet; she never showed her portraits until they were complete.

"You said you were finished," said Robert, but he halted.

"I said you could go; I didn't say I'd finished. I'll be a few more hours yet, but I don't need you." She glanced from the picture and over at Robert, and she smiled as though she'd just seen him — he was no longer the stranger who'd been sitting for her. "I want to get it done tonight."

"O.K. When do you think you'll be through?"

"I'll be back about eight, no later than nine."

"Fine. Don't be late; I'll book a table for dinner, to celebrate. Shall I pick you up here?"

Corinne nodded, her attention returning to the painting in front of her.

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"That way at least I'll get to see my picture," said Robert. "I'll come by at half past eight, O.K.? Phone me if there's a change in plan."

Corinne squeezed another inch of cerise onto the piece of mirror she used as a palette, and when she looked around next, Robert had gone. She wasn't sure if he'd left a minute ago or an hour.

She realized that there wasn't much more she could do; the light from the window was fading. Even if there had been more daylight, she had virtually finished. She put down her brushes and easel and climbed off the stool. She had finished; there was no point trying to delay the moment any longer. She was through. It was over, finished. Her last portrait.

She didn't even look at it as she took her brushes over to the corner by the sink and began cleaning them with turpentine.

What was it Robert had said before? That he'd come and pick her up before they went out to dinner? But that was no good. She had to go home and change. She kept other clothes in her studio, but nothing suitable for going out. And she certainly wanted to shower and wash her hair if they intended to celebrate.

After drying her hands, she rubbed skin lotion into her palms and worked it around her fingers and up to her wrists. She stared at her hands. They were long and slender, like her fingers. Her fingernails were trimmed down almost to the quick, because they were very brittle and split easily. Maybe she'd have time to grow and take care of them better from now on.

She took off her smock and hung it up, glancing around the high-ceilinged white room and remembering all the people who had been there. Corinne had always preferred painting in this room, although that hadn't always been possible. Removing her headband, she shook her hair free as she walked toward the phone. She noticed her distorted image in the blank screen while punching out the first digits. Then she paused and pressed the cancel button.

What was the point in calling Robert? What was there to tell him? Only that she was coming home early. She could be back in less than half an hour; then she could bring him here to view the completed portrait before they went out for the evening.

Ideally, she would have liked to take the picture now and give it to Robert as her gift. But it was too wet and awkward to manage alone.

She put on her street clothes, her old faded and patched coat, the scratched boots with worn heels, then left the room and security-sealed the door. Although the major walkways were quite well guarded, Corinne always carried a bag with a small sum of money. It could easily be snatched from her hand, and it was safer than having nothing. If an attacker found

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nothing to steal, he was more likely to become violent.

She walked quickly, not looking at anyone as she passed, her eyes aimed at the ground a dozen feet ahead of her, until she reached the perimeter fence that surrounded the block of flats. The armed guard in the blockhouse opened the outer gate as she approached and he recognized her.

Often, Corinne had considered that she ought to take over one of the other flats as her studio, but it wouldn't have been the same. She'd had the old room for fifteen years now, and she felt more at home there in some respects than in the apartment she and Robert shared.

The outer gate shut and the inner one opened, and Corinne walked across the bare concrete toward the entrance. She glanced up at the twenty-story tower for a moment; then, as she reached the glass door, she saw Robert in the hallway, waiting for the lift. Corinne slowly pushed open the swing door and began to creep silently toward him.

Then she realized that he wasn't alone. A slender girl with short curly red hair was with him, and Robert was nodding his head as she spoke. Corinne paused, wondering who she could be. Perhaps she was one of the neighbors. The lift doors opened, and Robert put his arm around the girl's shoulder, drawing her close to him and kissing her on the cheek. She laughed and pulled away, jumping into the lift.

Corinne froze, unable even to turn away in case Robert should see her. But all of Robert's attention was on his companion, and the lift doors slid shut. Slowly, Corinne walked toward the lift and pressed the button automatically.

What was going on? She'd seen Robert, she'd seen the girl, and she'd seen the way they had been behaving — but she refused to believe the evidence of her own eyes. No wonder Robert had asked her what time she'd be finishing at the studio tonight and to tell him if there was any change. He'd wanted to bring that girl back here with him.

The second lift appeared, the doors opening, but Corinne didn't move. The doors swished shut. She turned and went out through the swing door.

When she reached the studio, it was twilight and she couldn't remember having walked there. She felt dazed and bewildered as she moved across the bare floor and sat down on her stool in front of the easel and stared at Robert's picture.

"How could you?" she whispered. "How could you?"

Without realizing, she'd picked up her sharpest knife from the workbench. Now she raised it like a dagger, about to plunge the blade into Robert's treacherous face.

Her hand quivered, and her eyes were wet with tears, blurring her vision of the portrait. This wasn't the answer. She opened her fingers, and

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the knife dropped to the floor.

Corinne sat without moving as night fell, and she shivered, feeling hollow and cold inside.

After a while she stood up and walked across the room toward the phone.

Corinne! Where have you been?" Robert stared at her, his face reflecting a complex series of emotions — relief and anger, joy and anxiety. "I've been nearly out of my mind, worried to death. What happened to you?"

"Hello, Robert," said Corinne, pushing past him into the living room. "I've been away,"

Robert rubbed his hands across his cheeks. "I know you've been away, for God's sakes! But where? Why? What happened? Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." Corinne sat down. "I feel a bit tired, that's all."

She was exhausted. For fifteen days she'd been under sedation, and the effects of the drugs hadn't worn off yet. They hadn't told her what had been done, and she felt almost exactly the same as she had the day she entered the clinic. There were no scars or any sign that her body had been operated on. Perhaps it had all been a hoax, a joke fashioned by the prime minister's warped sense of humor; maybe he'd raped her every day while she'd been unconscious. Corinne didn't really care.

Robert sat on the edge of the chair opposite, staring at her. "I've been through hell, Corinne. I thought you were in hospital or had been kidnapped . . . or were dead. All I could hope was that you'd decided to go on that holiday without me. I tried the police, the security forces, the medical authorities. No one knew, and no one wanted to know." He shook his head. "It's good to see you, marvelous to see you. Are you going to tell me what happened?"

Corinne shrugged, trying to keep her heavy eyelids from touching. "I had to get away, Robert, that's all. I'm sorry I couldn't let you know. But . . . ." She shrugged again.

"Corinne, Corinne, Corinne . . ." Robert stood up and paced the room. "When we went to the studio that night and found you gone, we thought you must have come back here and we'd missed you. Then when you never arrived. . . . Oh, God, I can't begin to tell you. . . . Why the hell couldn't you let me know you were all right?"

Corinne watched him as he paused and stared out of the window. She frowned. "'We?'" she asked.

"Yeah. Juliet was here, my niece. You know her, Louisa's daughter."

"Juliet?" repeated Corinne, trying to remember.

"Yes, Juliet. She's started at art college now and she wanted to see you again. She phoned up because she was in London, and I invited her around that evening."

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Corinne stood up and walked over to Robert, putting her arms around him and resting her head on his shoulder. He ran his fingers through her hair and held her tight.

Corinne wanted to cry, but there were no more tears.

Corinne wished she had never painted that portrait of Robert, or that she'd destroyed it when she had the opportunity — yet she didn't want to be without it, either. While it hung on the wall of the house in Kent where they'd moved after their two-year world tour, it reminded her of how Robert had been.

The portrait was how she always thought of him, and whenever she studied him properly it came as a surprise to notice how much he'd altered. His hair was thinning on top and the black lightening to gray at the sides, while the skin around his cheeks was more creased and drawn; his face was gaunter, a maze of broken veins; he'd put on weight, particularly around the middle; he no longer stood so straight, and his shoulders seemed more hunched, as though the passing years were dragging him down. He was forty-eight years old, one year more than Corinne.

Yet Corinne hadn't altered since she had returned from the clinic.

She studied her image in the mirror every day, looking for signs of aging — for deeper wrinkles on her face, for her skin to become drier and lose its tautness, for the first gray hair to show itself. But there was nothing.

At first she had pretended that by keeping her appearance, it would prevent Robert from looking at younger women. He had no need to, because she was a younger woman now. But all the time she was worried by the fact that Robert was growing older while she was not. What would happen when it became all too apparent? How would he react when he discovered, as he inevitably must, that the years were dividing them?

She ate more starchy food and gave up exercise, trying to add a few pounds to her slender figure; she no longer spent so much time looking after her skin, and she chose different makeup; she tinted her hair a shade lighter, gradually adding hints of gray. It made a difference, but not much.

And in all the years after the treatment, Corinne never picked up a brush; there was neither the need nor the desire to paint again.

She and Robert spent almost all of their time together. They had always talked for hour after hour, but now it seemed there was very little to talk about. There was less laughter, and there was less loving.

"I think we ought to move back to London," Robert said one warm summer afternoon as they sat in the garden and watched two butterflies chase each other across the empty swimming pool. "It's a lot safer there these days."

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"I like it here," Corinne answered.

"So do I, but I don't think it's good for us. We're so isolated, it's like living in another world. The days slip by, then the weeks and months, almost without noticing. Then suddenly another year's passed."

Corinne said nothing.

"And you've still got your studio in London," Robert told her.

"Have I?" Corinne turned to look at him.

Robert nodded. "I've kept on paying the rent, because I knew you'd want to go back there someday."

"We're not broke, are we?"

"No, not at all. But I thought you might want to start painting again."

"Why?"

"Why? Because you're an artist, that's why. You didn't start painting for money; that wasn't the reason you did it. I know you said you'd stop doing portraits, but you didn't mean you'd give up painting absolutely."

Corinne wondered what had made Robert bring up the subject, and she waited for him to continue.

"I think you ought to start painting again, and soon," he said. "It's been eight years. You never do anything these days, nothing at all. You don't even read, and I look after the house and garden. You . . . you've just retired." He shrugged, then smiled, as if to take the edge off what he'd said.

"There's plenty of time," said Corinne, and she returned her attention to the butterflies.

"You've changed, you know; you're different. Ever since you went missing that time." He grabbed hold of her arm, forcing her to look at him.

After that first day, when Corinne wouldn't answer, Robert had never questioned Corinne again about her disappearance. He seemed to have realized that she would never tell him where she'd been or what had happened.

"I haven't changed, Robert." Corinne said.

Robert stared at her, his brow creased, his eyes studying her face. He opened his mouth slightly, as if to speak, then closed it again. He shook his head once. Looking down at where his hand clutched her bare arm, he squeezed his fingers against her flesh for a moment before letting go.

"No," he said slowly, as his eyes widened, "you haven't, have you? I'm the one who's changed." He stood up abruptly, his chair toppling to the ground, and he turned his back on Corinne. "Tell me it isn't true."

"What?" Corinne glanced at him as he clenched his fists by his side. He couldn't know, he couldn't possibly know. He was only guessing wildly.

"Tell me it isn't true!" He spun around, his eyes meeting hers.

Corinne blinked, then looked away.

"I see," he said, his voice little more than a whisper.

"What's the matter, Robert?"

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"Come on! Don't play games. You can't pretend anymore."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Corinne. Then she looked away, searching for the butterflies, but they had disappeared.

Robert went back into the house. He left an hour later, and she never saw him again.

Lying on a towel, a huge parasol protecting her from the sun's glare, Corinne stared out across the white sand toward the turquoise ocean.

"There's a letter for you," said Kurt, as he sat down next to her and set the tray of iced bottles and chilled glasses on the low table.

Corinne raised her sunglasses and peered at the envelope as Kurt held it toward her. It had been a long time since she'd received a letter. This one had followed her around the world, judging by the number of changes to the address.

"Open it," she said.

Kurt did so, and she took the single sheet of paper from him and unfolded it. The letter was handwritten, and she glanced at the signature first, not recognizing it. Juliet Merchant. Then she looked at the date.

"What's the date today?" she asked.

Kurt told her; the letter had been written three months ago. She began reading.

Dear Corinne Dewar:

You probably do not remember me, but we met many years ago when you came to visit my parents. My mother, Louisa, was Robert Coogan's sister. I will never forget meeting you. In fact, it was probably because I met you that I went to art college. I studied fine art, but was not good enough to become a full-time painter. I did, however, meet my future husband at college, and we now have three children and four grandchildren.

The reason I am writing is to give you the sad news that Robert died last week. He passed away peacefully in his sleep, of natural causes. I have no idea why you and my uncle separated after so many years together, and he would never say. Some time previously, Robert asked me to write to you upon his death and say that he was sorry and that he understood — he said you would know what he meant. He could not write himself, as he had become blind during the last years of his life.

Finally, I would just like to add how much pleasure your work has given me and say how much I and so many other regretted your decision to give up painting.

I hope you are in good health. Best wishes.

Juliet Merchant.

Corinne folded the letter, then tore it into pieces before giving it back

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to Kurt. Kurt handed her one of the two tall glasses he had filled. As she raised it to her lips, Corinne studied him from the corner of her eye, noticing the fold of spare flesh around his waist and the way his hair was starting to recede at the temples.

She sipped her drink, gazing across the smooth beach to the tanned, lithe figure of a young man walking in their direction. He had been swimming, and his nude body sparkled with drops of water. His hair was blond and his limbs and torso finely muscled.

As he passed Corinne, his eyes appraised her own slim, naked body. He smiled at her, slowing his pace, and Corinne returned the smile.

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Installment 15: *In Which A Gourmet Feast Is Prepared Of Words A Mere Two Months' Old*

I have no idea who "A. Kindsvater" is, but s/he was represented by a quote at the top of a page of a 1982 memo book sent to me four years ago around Christmastime by a roofing repair company I'd engaged to locate a leak under the Robert Silverberg Memorial Cactus and Succulent Roof Garden here at Ellison Wonderland; oh I guess that'd be back around 1979; and they kept sending me these nifty genuine imitation-leather plastic-cover memo & date reminder booklets, little pocket-size jobbies, with birthstones and which-wedding-anniversary-is-the-13th (traditionally lace, but more contemporaneously, textiles and furs are looked on as appropriate), and a place to write in all the appointments you'd have gotten to on time if you'd thought far enough ahead to carry the little genuine imitation-leather plastic-cover memo & date reminder booklet with you, but you didn't think that far ahead and so the booklet lay in a drawer, unused for four years, until a few weeks ago when I tossed it out, along with the reminder booklets from 1983, 1984 and 1985; but not before I went through them and pulled out a few of those obscure quotations that serve as running heads every week. And that's where I discovered this quote by the dreaded "A.

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Kindsvater" whomever. Which quote was as follows:

"The probability of someone watching you is proportionate to the stupidity of your action."

Kindsvater — about whom I know absolutely nothing, yet whom I choose to capture in my imagination as having devised that truism at the moment s/he was caught by the *Man on the Street's* minicam as s/he was having perverted sex with a Rocky Mountain oyster in the show window of Bloomingdale's — certainly knew whereof s/he spoke, because no sooner do I write a column in which I explain in detail why there will never again be a worthwhile sf movie, than I see what is not only the greatest sf film ever made but is, in my infallible view, easily one of the ten greatest films of all time.

(This list of 10, which I change in a shamelessly duplicitous fashion to suit the occasion, variously includes *La Strada, The Wizard of Oz, Casablanca, M, Viva La Muerte, Providence* and *Citizen Kane* and *The Magnificent Ambersons* and *Paths of Glory* and thirty others; but you get the idea.)

Kindsvater had it absolutely pegged because I know all of you read that column, only two months ago, and have been sharpening your yellow fangs waiting for me to poke my little head up out of the molehill of opinion wherein I reside; waiting with blowguns to lips for me to register any sort of ameliorative revisionism; waiting to make me eat my words, force-fed through the medium of your ever-vigilant, ever-contentious, ever-maliciously nitpicking letters to the Noble Fermans who edit and publish this magazine.

Well, if I have to masticate my manuscripture, I'll do it in as flambouyantly gourmandising a manner as was my original pronouncement. I herewith eat my words. The belief that sf is dead as a serviceable genre for motion pictures — stated baldly and without equivocation in my January installment — was a precise and correct view of the universe except for one thing: I hadn't seen BRAZIL (20th Century Fox / Universal). I eat my words, but the *maitre d'* is Terry Gilliam. And okay I made an ass of myself in print for the very first time in my life, but I can live with it because, though I may look like a dip, I'm still better off than you, because I've seen what is surely the greatest sf film of all time (and one of the 10 greatest films ever made), and you never will. Nyaah nyaah!

But enough levity. It is enough that your faithful essayist has learned humility through adversity. Let it suffice that unbridled arrogance has been brought to its knees by contradicting evidence so inescapably overwhelming that all that remains to me is the act of contrition in which I drive to this tattoo artist's place I know in Venice (California, not Italy), and

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have the guy inscribe on my tongue the following, from Montaigne:

"To be cured of ignorance one must first confess it."

Brazil was the talk of London when I was there last summer. The reviews had been strange. Mixed reviews, if truth be told. Reviews that ranged from querulously timid admissions by lesser reviewers that they hadn't understood one frame of this singularly disturbing film, to sheer panegyrics by usually flinthearted critics in which the word "masterpiece" appeared so often it became suspect.

Moorcock went wild over it. Lisa Tuttle couldn't stop raving about it. One after another English or Scottish fan, upon first meeting, almost before saying, "Glad to meet you," radiated messianic fervor and asked, "Have you seen *Brazil* yet?" Well, no, I hadn't; because it had come and gone so fast in the U.K.

Distributed internationally by 20th (and in the U.S. and Canada by Universal), the film had been shown in England in its original 2-hour 22-minute version, and however well or badly it did at the boxoffice, it left in its wake the kind of awed comment usually reserved for books that turn out to be, fifty years later, contenders for literary immortality.

I was curious, naturally, but took it all the way we usually do when we hear how sensational some upcoming film is supposed to be. Like you, I've been burned too many times in the past few years. So I didn't go too far out of my way to find a suburban theater where *Brazil* might still be viewed.

I knew that *Brazil* was the latest directorial effort of the lone American member of the Monty Python troupe, Terry Gilliam. Having seen Gilliam's three previous films — *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1974), *Jabberwocky* (1977), and *Time Bandits* (1981) — I hadn't been wildly impressed with his abilities as regards the first two, but had gone absolutely bugfuck over *Time Bandits*, which remains one of my all-time favorite movies (though not one of the 10 greatest films of all time, like *Lawrence of Arabia, The Thief of Bagdad* [1939], *All About Eve, Metropolis, Throne of Blood, Viva Zapata* or *Singin' In the Rain*). I was anxious to see if the talent and inventiveness directorially displayed in *Time Bandits* had progressed to *Brazil* in as startling a quantum leap as it had shown between *Jabberwocky* and *Time Bandits*. And when I learned that Gilliam and Charles McKeown had been joined in the writing of the original screenplay by no less a master of wordplay than dramatist Tom Stoppard, my interest was truly piqued.

The cast sounded wonderful, too. Jonathan Pryce and Robert De Niro and Ian Holm and Bob Hoskins and Michael Palin, among many recogniz-

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able American and British names. But of the plot there was little said. No one could really explain to me what *Brazil* was about.

Was it about Brazil?

Well, no, Brazil doesn't enter into it at all.

Then where does the title come from?

Uh, well, you remember that song from the Thirties, "Brazil, where hearts were entertained in June, we stood beneath an amber moon, and softly murmured, 'Some day soon.'" And etcetera. Remember that song?

Yeah, sure, I remember it very well. It was one of my favorites. I remember a terrific version done by Hazel Scott on the organ in some dimly-recalled film or other. So what's that got to do with this movie?

Uh, well, it sort of plays over and under, throughout the film.

Then this is a romance.

Uh. Yes and no.

Well, what the hell *is* it?

It's, well, it's sort of a *1984*-like story, that may make you think of *Blade Runner*, except it isn't anything like either one of them, although it has some resonances with Lindsay Anderson's *O! Lucky Man* and *A Clockwork Orange*, but uh er it isn't very much like either of those, either, and there's elements of a lot of the screwball comedies of the Thirties, with the tough-talking dames in them, and all sorts of non-intrusive *hommages* to films like *Potemkin*, and all this big-screen adventure on a par with *Dune*, but nothing like *Dune* at all, and then there's all this dream sequence stuff and, uh . . . er . . . oh dear. . . .

Stop! Stop! What you're trying to tell me is that this film is unclassifiable. It's *sui generis*. It's the kind of film you demean if you try to identify it by saying it's like this or that movie, only more pink. Right?

That is correct.

Brazil is heart-stopping. It is brilliant beyond the meaning of the word. I guarantee you have never seen anything even remotely like this film.

And now here is the bad news.

Universal's Sid Sheinberg wants the film cut. And cut again. And "rethinked" to give it a happy ending. As "happy" endings were tacked onto the original *Invasion of The Body Snatchers* and *The Magnificent Ambersons*. Or he won't release it in the United States.

Not because he's an evil man, but because he *likes* the film, and he wants to see millions of people go to see it. Sheinberg has said, of this piece of genuine cinematic art, breathtaking in every way, "If we had this other ending and I could show you that it would do 100% more business, you'd be a fool not to agree, wouldn't you?"

Yes, we'd be fools not to agree, if the yardstick were how well a piece of art appealed to the Great Wad, rather than being true to its own

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creative vision and reaching only those who would weep at its gloriousness. We would be fools were we to suggest that *La Gioconda* might not be a greater work of art if she had a word-balloon coming out of her mouth, and thereby might reach a wider audience.

Terry Gilliam has not been allowed to preview the film here in America. Universal stopped two theater arts department showings at CalArts College and USC in October. Then Terry went on the *Today Show* and talked about it, with De Niro at his side. And all this, after Terry had voluntarily removed eleven minutes from the original version.

(Don't fret. Terry says those eleven minutes don't feel missing. He voices approval of the minus-eleven version.)

And so, all smartass aside, I must tell you that I was stunned by *Brazil* as I have not been stunned by a film in more than twenty years. I saw it by chance, at a very special bootleg screening, in company with half a dozen of the best critics in the country, all of us sworn to secrecy about who and where and how and when.

But it looks as if you, readers, will be cheated out of this extraordinary experience. Sid Sheinberg has always wanted to be a creator. The frustration of his life is that he is merely one of the canniest and most creative businessmen in the world. So he wants to make *Brazil* better in the time-honored tradition of businessmen who run the film industry. He wants to piss in it.

I tell you with cupidity, *Brazil* is one of the greatest motion pictures ever made. All gags aside, it is in the top ten.

I have given you twenty or more titles of what I think are *great* motion pictures, here in this column, because an opinion by a critic means nothing, unless the yardstick is there for you to measure the opinion. If you agree with me that the films I have named in this essay are among the greatest films ever produced, then you may give some small credence to one who eats his words of two months ago, and tells you that *Brazil* is certainly the finest sf movie ever made . . . and very likely one of the ten greatest films *of any kind* ever made.

And if you feel annoyed that you may never be allowed to judge for yourself, then drop a line to Sid Sheinberg at Universal, and tell him you want him to release Terry Gilliam's 2-hour and 11-minute version of *Brazil*.

And try to keep a civil tongue in your head.

I know how you are.

And Sid's already pissed at me, so you needn't bother to tell him that Harlan sent you. Besides, I've got my mouth full at the moment.

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All the dogs we've known have possessed hardly an ounce of deviousness, which is all to the good. But imagine, if you will, the difficulties of living with a pet that points out all the lies in your life . . .

The Dog of Truth

BY
KIT REED

In the juvenescence of the year, she thought moodily, *came Christ the tiger,* and what do I get? I get this stupid animal. It depressed her specifically because, except for the eyes, it was a ratty-looking creature.

It wasn't even a jungle animal that crouched on the Morris chair, regarding her. It was a dog.

They had been together for four days, the two of them, ever since the thing manifested itself in the middle of the decent period of mourning she had declared after she broke up with Alex. Four whole days, she thought, and she still didn't know how she felt about it. Creepy, that's how. Those eyes!

She'd been slumped in that very Morris chair in a welter of cookie boxes and candy wrappers, well on the way to becoming a truly fat person, when she first saw it.

At first it was no more than an intimation of light, a suggestion, flowing on the floor under the daybed, something glimmering faintly from underneath the dust ruffle. Depressed as she was, slightly addled by a surfeit of carbohydrates and weeping, she took it to be a figment of her imagination and turned her head so she wouldn't have to see it.

When she woke sometime after sunset, the room was dark and it was still there. She chose to believe it was only a hallucination. What else could it be? But when morning came and it was still there, she realized she was going to have to reckon with it.

She thought it might be an act of retribution: some unkindness designed by Alex; maybe he had trapped lightning bugs in a jar and sneaked them in here while she wasn't looking. But how could he have done it?

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She'd been here ever since they broke up, day and night, wallowing in Mallomars and scuppernong wine. She supposed it could be light leaking out of the electrical outlet underneath the daybed — but that was crazy.

What was it, then? It was noon before she could bring herself to get close enough to investigate, and it took more nerve than she realized she had for her to lift the dust ruffle.

To her surprise, there was something living underneath — a dog; at least she guessed it was a dog. The glow came from its eyes, which were chartreuse. If animals smile, the thing was definitely smiling. "Who are you?" she asked it, "and what are you doing under there?" Her voice spiked because, smiling or not, the apparition was alarming.

"Your mother sent me," it said reassuringly.

She found this even more alarming. She had never expected the thing to talk. Yet here they were, and it cocked its head in the dimly lit space underneath the daybed, waiting for her to answer it.

"Mother." Her sigh was not altogether friendly. "I should have known. But why you, and why now?"

"She said although you never tell her anything, a mother always knows these things."

"What things?"

"You know, that you've screwed up again."

"The bitch!"

It sniffed sulkily. "I'm only telling you what she said."

"But a dog, when she knows I think animals are creepy."

The eyes glowed a little brighter. "You might as well know up front, I'm not only an animal."

All her anger at Alex had somehow become focused now, on this implacable creature incandescing under the daybed, lighting up all her dust kittens and a pair of socks Alex had abandoned there like a silent reproach the first night she made him sleep on the sofa. But she was thinking about the animal. It was clearly uncomfortable under there, with its back rucked up against her bedsprings, but as she understood it, the thing was a gift from her mother, which put it in the category of things she might write thank-yous for but would never really accept; as a result she could barely bring herself to speak to it. She would not have it, she thought. First Alex; then her losing her job because she'd been too depressed to go to work next day, which happened to be the day of a major meeting, which was how she happened to get fired on top of losing Alex; and now this.

I'm not only an animal, it had said. She would show it a thing or two. She sniffed and dropped the dust ruffle. The glow seemed to be stronger. Reluctantly she lifted it again. The thing had not moved.

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"Well, are you going to invite me out, or what?"

"Come ahead," she said grudgingly. "You might as well. I haven't had a living soul to speak to since it all came down on me."

"I'm not exactly a living soul."

"Oh, come on, give me a break."

Seen in full daylight, it was not half-bad-looking. It had a rough coat, like the best terriers, and a muzzle that made it look like a cross between a jungle beast and a Teddy she had once owned. It took to the can of corned beef hash she had opened for it with a grin of gratitude, and once it had finished, got busy around the apartment, nosing throw rugs back in place and taking candy wrappers and discarded notes from Alex and several days' worth of newspapers in its teeth and putting them in the trash.

While it was busy thus, she washed her hair and put on something flattering. It seemed like the least she could do.

Then she came back into the living room. "This is terrific. Everything looks wonderful."

It bridled modestly. "It seemed like the least I could do."

With her hair clean and her face looking decent, she could afford to be generous. "Under the circumstances. You understand it isn't you that makes me nervous. I mean, you personally. It's where you came from." Translated, this meant: that it was a gift from her mother, who was not a favorite person. But it misread her.

"I come from Beyond," it said modestly.

"You've got to be kidding."

"No, really. I was drifting out there the way we all do when I got the call — urgent message, come right down, help you to attend to things. You know. Good person in big trouble."

"But I'm just fine." The thing's eyes went from chartreuse to Kelly green, and she reconsidered. "O.K., you came to the right place. I'm feeling shitty and everything is lousy."

Without sounding the least bit smug, it said, "Exactly. Which is what I'm doing here. Let me introduce myself. On second thought, you first." It made a little bow.

"Amanda," she said self-consciously. "Amanda Springer."

"What a nice name. No, I mean really. And I . . ." The glow from the eyes was both paler and, strangely, a brighter color. "I am the Dog of Truth," it said into a silence that seemed to construct itself just to receive the information. "Now, what can I do for you?"

She suppressed the first answer that came to her. Of course she didn't want Alex back; she was too smart to need any man, too witty, too — successful? Not lately. "I think I want my job back."

It seemed to be saying, MMMMMMM. "So I understand. Now tell me what you want, really."

"Just when we were getting along

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so well. My job back is what I most want, really."

It just glimmered.

She acknowledged this with a sigh of what might have been recognition. "All right, I don't know what I want."

Which was how she ended up dropping several hundred dollars in a midtown boutique, and learned once and for all and for the first time how to *Dress for Success.* The Dog of Truth had somehow become small enough to fit into a small canvas tote bag, which meant it went with her into the shop and into the dressing room, where it passed on every stitch she tried: this dress was too pastel, that one too tartish; the green one would make them all turn up their toes and die — just right. When she came out, she was gorgeous.

"It's your fault," she said, putting away her MasterCard. "I've spent every cent I have coming from unemployment."

From inside the tote bag, it coughed politely.

"O.K., O.K., it's not your fault. I wanted to spend every cent. Now what?"

If dogs could be said to purr, the animal was purring. "Let's have lunch."

At lunch it slid out of the bag and assumed normal size so it could perch opposite her at a table in a sidewalk café.Nobody seemed to notice it and, arresting as the thing was, it did not attract even a glance from passers-by. Instead the two of them ate more or less in silence, munching on chocolate croissants with a particularly nice triple creme cheese.

"We're going to get fat." Amanda corrected herself quickly. "I mean, I am."

She supposed this was how, after her unannounced appearance at the office, she ended up changing out of her drop-dead *Dress for Success* ensemble and running around the reservoir.

She was going to have to keep trim if she was going to keep up with her new duties as vice president.

How had it happened? She concentrated extremely carefully while it was going on, but it had all happened so fast that she still could not say precisely how it had happened, except that she'd arrived at the office with the dog breathing on her heels and something about her — costume, manner, the dog — had prompted Marianne to pass her on into the boss's office without an appointment and in spite of the fact that the Softness Group was there for the second in a series of major meetings on the merger she'd been slated to mastermind before the breakup with Alex had left her on the rocks.

What had she said, exactly? She did not know. All she could remember were the looks on the faces of the group in the room as she and the Dog of Truth swarmed into the meeting like warriors taking a fallen city, and

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the fact that in a few suave sentences (perhaps abetted by the dog, whose presence prompted the others to say things they thought secretly but never intended to reveal), she had turned the meeting around and brought the Softness Group into the company fold like so many grateful sheep.

Yes, it was wonderful. She took the Dog of Truth to dinner at the Indian Oven as a special thank-you treat.

Meanwhile there were big doings with Alex. He wanted to come over. He called up out of a clear sky, and begged.

"Really, Alex, I'm tied up tonight." Even with her back turned, she knew what color those green eyes were turning. "I mean, I don't know if I want to see you. I mean, I want to see you, but I don't know how to handle it."

So here they were, she and the Dog of Truth, which seemed to have been sent by her mother, a doubtful boon. In less than twenty-four hours, everything had changed. She knew she ought to be more grateful, but still . . .

Alex would be here at ten. It occurred to her that it might be a wise precaution to put her new pet to bed before he came.

"Don't mind me," it said. "Chances are he won't even be able to see me."

She gave it a stern look. "I just bought you a fabulous dinner and I have, furthermore, entertained your every little thought on life and art and truth ever since we met."

"Of those three, truth is the most important."

"Don't be didactic."

"Even so."

She couldn't help it. She let it know she was exasperated with it. "Just this once will you give me a little break?"

"All right, all right." She could tell it was sulking. "I'll just go back under this bed."

"Not so fast. This is between Alex and me. Just Alex. Just me."

"That may not be so easy."

"Don't be so ridiculous. Now I want you to go in the bathroom and stay in there until I give you the all clear."

She decided it would be best to greet Alex in a selection from the evening wear quadrant of her new *Dress for Success* wardrobe. He, in turn, had chosen to come in his car-tinkering ensemble, a fact she did her best to overlook in spite of the fact that the T-shirt was smelly and the shorts were stiff with grease.

He said, "You look wonderful."

With a little frisson that surprised her because she didn't know what it signaled, she said, "Well, so do you."

"Or I will as soon as I get a shower." It was clear where Alex's mind was running.

"No, no. Not in there!"

He looked puzzled.

"Plumbing problems." Why did this

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evasion make her so uncomfortable? "Let me watch you scrub up. You can use the kitchen sink."

"You won't mind?"

She said, truthfully, "We don't have any choice."

How could she explain what had happened to her in the past few days while they were separated? How could she explain to him what strange chain of circumstances had restored the *joie* to her *vivre,* the sheen to her hair, and the aspiring executive to her desk? If she showed him the animal, whether or not he could see it, he would think she was crazy. Worse yet (Alex hated pets), he would force some kind of confrontation: listen, honey, it's either it or me. You can't light candles in two places. He would insist she kick the creature out. Would that be such a bad thing? She did not know. She knew only that she'd been in a decline until the thing manifested itself, slouched in the very chair where Alex was sitting, wallowing in grief and Mallomars, with her hair getting greasier and her face beginning to bloat. But since then and this morning, when she'd finally acknowledged the green glow and nerved herself to confront the thing, her fortunes had changed.

She lunged to put herself between Alex and the bathroom where her strange pet lurked. "Where are you going? I told you the plumbing needs fixing."

"My old bathrobe. I left it on the back of the door."

She lied desperately. "I threw it out. I'll buy you a new one," she added hastily, to make amends. "Velour, if you like, or better yet, raw silk."

In time he let her draw him into the kitchen, where he scrubbed while she went into the bedroom to find some old thing for him to throw on. To her surprise, the Dog of Truth was not in the bathroom, where she had left it. It was curled up in the middle of her queen-sized bed.

It said, "I didn't want to inconvenience you. The bathroom's free."

"I told you to stay put."

Why did it answer in her mother's tones? "I won't have you fibbing to protect me."

"Oh, good grief." She locked the bedroom door on it.

When their midnight supper was over, Alex seemed surprised that she drew him over to the daybed instead of going to seal their reconciliation on her Pierre Cardin sheets.

"It's cramped here," he said. His knuckles dragged on the floor by the dust ruffle.

"Don't be boring. It's romantic. Our problem was we were taking each other for granted." Of course that had not been the problem; she'd stepped out — just once! — with an old boyfriend from her hometown. In his Punch-and-Judy fashion, Alex had retaliated before she even had a chance to explain.

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"It doesn't matter," Alex was breathing into her ear. "You're the only person I've ever really loved."

Turned on her side as she was, so she could face him, Amanda was disconcerted by the fact that although they had turned off the lights and closed the shutters, the walls and ceiling glimmered like a glow-in-the-dark Frisbee after it's been held close to a lamp.

Alex was importuning her. "Now tell me just exactly how much you care for me."

She begged the question by burying her face in his hair — to no avail. When she closed her eyes, the inside of her head seemed to be a pale green.

"Amanda. Speak to me."

It was a little hard to do because in spite of the closed door, defying the laws of logic, the Dog of Truth had escaped the bedroom somehow and stationed itself on the Morris chair, and it was glaring at both of them. She could read its expression: this man is a rat — he isn't worth it. And you are not telling the truth. You're near the man you love only 'cause you love the man you're near. Was it humming a little? She prayed Alex couldn't hear.

Alex was alert now; because they had been together for so long and now they'd made it up, he was once more attuned to her, which meant he turned to see what she was upset about. "What's that?"

"I am the Dog of Truth," it said sententiously, overriding Amanda, who was mumbling, "It's kind of hard to explain."

But she did explain, as it turned out, as quickly as possible, throwing in all the code words and gestures that develop in a long relationship, even a troubled one — anything to foil the creature, which was beginning to get on her nerves.

Alex smacked his forehead. "You mean it . . . ."

"The truth," she said.

"No matter what?"

She sighed. "So it would seem."

"You know I love you more than anything . . ." The green glow in the room was stronger.

"And I love you more than anything, too." She turned her head to protect her eyes from the blinding light.

"Then you know what we're going to have to do."

"Wait a minute, guys." The thing was fizzling like a Fourth-of-July fireworks finale.

Rolling off the daybed as one, they bundled up the flowered cover and lunged toward it, muffling it like a parrot that has gotten out of hand.

She thought it an interesting coincidence that it was her mother's tones the creature echoed right before they overpowered it, yelping, "I'm only doing this for your own good."

What they finally did with the Dog of Truth, a solution that seemed more

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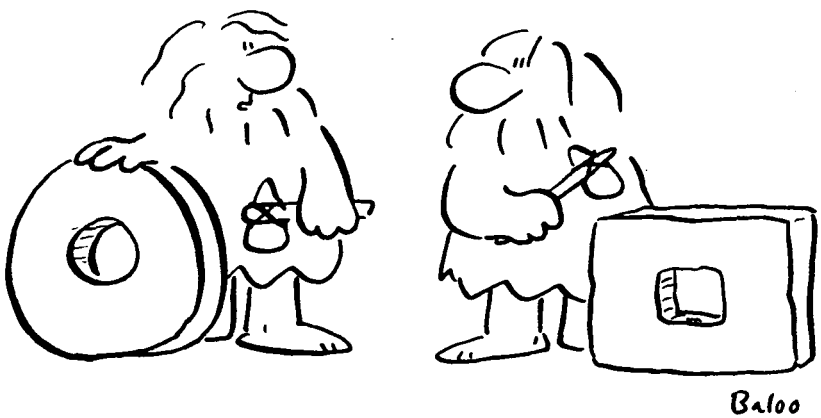
human, although less satisfying, than weighting a bag and throwing it off a convenient bridge, was to bundle it into the Goodwill Industries pickup box in the customer parking lot down at the Stop and Shop. As they drove away, she looked back and with a little pang saw its light flickering like the glimmer of an abandoned lightning bug; at least, she thought, it will have a good home.

Would she be able to keep her new job without the Dog of Truth? She did not know. For that matter, would she be able to keep Alex? She was not sure. What she did know was that they couldn't even hope to be happy together with that unearthly thing hanging around with its accusatory eyes, waiting to catch them up on every tiny little mental reservation and flash like the Hatteras light if they tried anything more serious.

She stifled creeping lonely feelings, but could not keep from saying, "I think I'm kind of going to miss it."

Alex ran a red light without a second thought and, hale as he was, pulled into a handicapped parking space so he could take her in his arms. "Good riddance," Alex said.



"What are you *making, Ed-Sel?"*

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George Zebrowski sent us this story with the observation that "SF is supposed to be a literature of ideas, but most of the time the ideas are merely superficial conceits." Here is something different, a story based on the philosophy of mathematics.

Gödel's Doom

BY
GEORGE ZEBROWSKI

"So what are we going to beg time for now?" I asked as Witter slid in across from me in the cafeteria booth. A thin, hyper type, he folded his hands in front of my coffee and said, "It's an experiment I want to run on the new A1-5." He spoke very precisely, very insistently, as usual. "I've been haunted by it all my life, but now it can actually be done."

"What do you mean?" I asked, picking up my coffee, afraid that he would knock it over.

"Well, previous Artificial Intelligences were too slow and not capable of complex inference. The question is how much time can you give me?" He brushed back his messy hair.

"How much do you need?" I sipped the coffee, sensing his restrained excitement. Witter had always been a valuable worker, so I had to listen and try to keep him happy, within reason, despite his nervous enthusiasms. But he was never satisfied with merely testing equipment and programs for industrial applications.

"I don't know," he said cautiously. "A lot maybe. More than a couple of days."

I put down my coffee, irritated. "You don't know? Can't you estimate?"

"Nope. I'd better explain."

"Go ahead."

"You know about Gödel?"

"I know Gödel's proof, but tell me from scratch. You might be doing some illegal reasoning."

He leaned forward as if he were going to tell me a dirty story. "Well," he said, lowering his voice, "you're familiar with the conclusion that no machine-like entity that proceeds by clearly defined mechanical steps can complete any system that is rich

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enough to generate simple arithmetic — that is, make it a consistent system in which we could not come up with new, true, and still unproven propositions, in fact ones that would be unprovable in the system, yet clearly true."

"I know, math can't be mechanized"

"Not completely mechanized. We've done it to a remarkable degree. . . ."

"What else is new?"

"Well, if Gödel's proof is right, and human minds can regularly generate true but unprovable propositions in any potentially self-consistent system, then mechanism, or determinism, does not apply to us."

"But what is it that you want to *do*, Witter?" I was only half listening. It was late in the day. The cafeteria was nearly empty and the newly polished floor was a large mirror; our booth seemed to float on it.

"Well," he said, "I want to give the new Artificial Intelligence the command to complete mathematics."

"What?" I suddenly saw what he was getting at.

"Don't you see? We can do an experiment that might settle the nature of the universe — whether we live in a hard determinism or a soft one in which free will is possible."

I smiled, feeling superior. "But we know Gödel was right. Math can't be completed. He gave a powerful formal proof, one in which you can't have it both ways."

Witter, who had been looking away as we spoke, turned his head half around and fixed me with one glassy brown eye. "Come on, Bruno. Why not run the experiment anyway?"

I shrugged and sat back, looking around. "As you said, it might take a long time — forever, if Gödel's right."

"Maybe," he said, finally looking at me with both eyes. The combination of the blue and brown eyes had always given me the creeps. "According to Gödel, the computer will crank out mathematical statements forever, and we'll never know if the body of the system is a complete one. But if it is complete, then our AI will finish it off in some finite period of time. It's the fastest system ever developed, able to do involved operations that might take centuries otherwise."

"No matter how fast it is, we won't disprove Gödel. He proved that independently of all need to do experiments! Now I know why you want a lot of time. We won't live long enough to learn the result, even if you're right, which you can't be." I started to get up.

"Look," he insisted, "why not do the experiment? If we live in a hard determinism, as so many believe, then it's already true — the AI will complete math or any system we give it. But if Gödel is right, the AI-5 will run on forever, unable to complete."

"We don't have forever. You've gone bonkers."

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"Why don't we do it? We *can* do the experiment! Look, for the first time an experiment involving pure logic and math may yield knowledge of the world outside."

That part appealed to me, but I saw a way of being perverse. Was he presenting me with a choice or dictating that I authorize the experiment?

He smiled, anticipating my thought. "Either there's free will, or you're fated to let the experiment be done."

I sighed. "But there's still the matter of how long it will take, Felix. AI-5, no matter how fast it is, may keep running and we won't be able to tell whether it's an uncompletable process or just a very long one."

He shrugged. "Aren't you willing to take the chance?"

"This just doesn't make any sense to me at all."

He smiled again. "But it gets to you, doesn't it? My point holds. Why not do it? Just to see. How often in the history of math or logic has there been a chance to do pure theoretical work that might reveal something about the real world?"

"But it's doomed to fail!"

He nodded. "Probably; Bruno, I'll grant you that. But even so, the experiment will be historic. Purely mathematical and empirical at the same time."

"Romantic mathematics, I call it." "Or Kant's synthetic a priori!"

I'd read some of that metaphysical junk and he seemed to be stretching it. Sure, synthetic meant acquiring new knowledge, and a priori meant that it wasn't derived from experience, strictly speaking, but from reasoning. Our experiment would give us new knowledge of the universe through nonempirical means. "But you're cheating," I said. "Whatever you call it, using the AI means only doing an empirical experiment."

He cocked one eyebrow and gave me a crazed stare with his blue eye. "Would you say that it would be more empirical if we did it by pencil and paper? That's all Gödel had to work with."

"Okay, I guess I'll have to say that there are no purely a priori activities. Even using the mind alone is a way of reaching out into the universe. What we can call experiments are merely corroborations. Einstein himself said that if the experiments didn't come out as he expected, then he'd pity God who made the universe that way."

"Okay, Bruno, I know you know more than most section chiefs, but are we going to do it or not?"

So we ran the experiment, if you could call it that. Witter was right about one thing. If Gödel's proof was somehow wrong, and we could complete even one system on our fast AI, then a lot of people would have to do a lot of rethinking in the groundwork of logic and math.

But I knew damn well that Gödel

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couldn't be wrong. Formal proofs do not fall easily. It would be a mistake of some kind if our AI-5 showed that completeness in a significant system was achievable.

All right. We both wanted to see what would happen if we tried it. We pieced time together from a dozen other projects when people would be away or on vacation.

It was Friday night, after hours. We would be alone until Monday. I sat down at the keyboard and tapped in the command. Witter was sitting next to me, staring up at the bank of screens.

The AI began its run, building arithmetic up out of baby talk. Soon it was going by in a blur, but the AI showed no sign of slowing down.

"There is one danger," I said as we sat back and waited. "If the AI can't complete arithmetic, it will sift through larger and larger banks of information. . . ."

"It can handle infinite amounts of data," Witter replied.

"Yes, but the power needed for that, Witter, the power! The cost!"

He shook his head. "Don't shout. That won't happen. It will all be over in a few hours at most."

But the AI-5 kept running. An hour went by.

"It's not going to stop, Felix. It can't. Gödel was right. But even if he was wrong, it may take more than our lifetimes to prove it."

"Take it easy, Bruno. Go polish the floor, or something."

He was too serene.

Another hour went by. Witter stared at the screens, hypnotized by the blurred flow. Rivers of reasoning ran from the headwaters to a new ocean of well-formed propositions, and still the ocean was not filled; it would never be filled.

As I looked around at the clean right angles of the room, at the symmetrical terminals and easily accessed units, I began to think that maybe Witter was slightly stupid, that he didn't understand simple logic or the idea of a proof. Gödel's paradoxical conclusion could not be broken, unless it wasn't a double bind to begin with, because you can't have it both ways. Something was very wrong with Felix Witter.

And yet, I wanted him to have a point. This was an experiment, a recourse to more than personal opinion; it could do more, in principle, than reasoning, prediction, or guesswork. Set a powerful genie to do the impossible — not because you think the genie can do it, but because you can ask, and it has the power to do all that's possible. So why not ask, just to see, human beings have always been suspicious of mere reasoning, no matter how powerful. Suddenly I wanted to see Gödel fail, to see the pride and arrogance of mathematicians crumble.

But as we watched the AI-5 chase

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the mirage, there was no sign of an end, no slowdown at all.

"I'm hungry," I said. "Want a pizza?"

He nodded without looking at me. I got up, went out into the hall, and called it in from the wall phone. Then I alerted the security guard downstairs and asked him to leave it out on a cart in front of the workroom.

"We may have to stop it," I said, hours later, "even if it's close to completion." Though the pizza had been very bad, I thought as I eyed the empty boxes on the cart, a full stomach had taken some of the romance out of what we were doing. "We can't tie up all this power and time indefinitely. It's using more every minute, and it'll be my ass if we can't justify it."

"No!" Witter shouted maniacally. "It may be very close."

I burped, waiting for my heartburn to subside. The AI-5 hummed along.

"We can continue from this point onward at another time," I insisted.

"Be quiet!"

I reached over to stop the run. Felix grabbed my hand and pinned it to the panel.

"What's wrong with you?" I demanded.

"Just a few minutes more," he said, fixing me with his mismatched eyes. "We're at the edge of a major discovery!"

"Felix, this can't be done." I struggled to free myself, but his strength was that of a true believer.

"Be still, you fool," he said harshly. "Don't you see? This will be the culmination of our careers. We'll never match this no matter how hard we work. Gödel is one of the supreme monuments of mathematics, marking the limits of human minds. If we topple him. . . ."

"You may not like what you get," I said, twisting my arm. "If his proof is right, then mechanism is false and minds are not machines. They escape the completeness of the purely mechanical. But if Gödel is wrong, then we're automatons! I'd rather not know."

He shook his head. "There's even more to it than that, Bruno."

"What?" I was breathing very hard, unable to free myself.

"We're opening up the very vitals of reality."

I had to laugh. "By manipulating man-made symbolic structures? You need a bucket of cold water to soak your head in. Let me go!"

"Completion may be only a few minutes away. Do you want to stop and then wonder what might have been?"

He tightened his grip.

"But you can't know how far along it is."

He let go of my hand and seemed to cool down, and I found I didn't have the heart to reach over and stop the run.

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"You're right," he said, "I'm sorry. It probably is all for nothing."

I massaged my hand. The AI continued its work run. "Don't feel too bad about it," I managed to say. "It was a nice idea, but it had to confirm Gödel. I'm glad we're not machines."

He was shaking his head. "You don't understand. There's no reason to fear that. It's not a problem."

"What isn't?"

"Free will," he said as the AI-5 stopped its run.

Witter and I looked at each other, then at the main screen. It read:

SYSTEM CAPABLE
OF GENERATING
ARITHMETIC COMPLETE

"It's a mistake of some kind," I said. Something strange seemed to pass across my eyes. I sat back, expecting to lose consciousness as the tension got to me.

"Maybe," Witter was saying, "but we can test to see if it's a mistake."

"How?" I heard myself ask, even though I knew the answer.

"By trying to make a true statement that is not provable in the system. As long as the AI can show us that we can't make such a statement by proving it, then the system is complete."

The room went black for a second. "But maybe we can't make such a statement," I said.

"We can try," he answered.

We tried for the next 12 hours. I was relieved that our prime AI was no longer running a huge power draw. Witter brought a smaller AI on-line and had it question the alleged complete system achieved by the AI-5. It failed to come up with a single true proposition that was not provable in the complete system.

"There's no question about it," Felix said finally.

"There's only one thing left to do," I replied. "We've got to run the whole thing again."

Witter looked at me, smiled strangely, then sat down and gave the command.

As the AI began its second run at Gödel, Witter turned to me and said, "Funny about determinism. I always think of it as stuff outside me, pushing at my skin. But I feel free inside. When that second run finishes, we'll be certain that we're living in a hard determinism. No choice is our own, if we've understood the word correctly. Even our decision to run the AI-5 again was not made freely. We're automatons. No avoiding the conclusion, Bruno."

He was baiting me, I was sure. "But we resist the notion. Doesn't that suggest something?"

He shrugged. "That we're free in our minds but not in our actions. We can envision alternatives, but whichever one we pick is determined, right up through an infinite future."

"Witter, I thought you were intelligent. There can't be such a thing as

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unconditioned freedom. There are always initial conditions — necessary and sufficient conditions for every choice. Otherwise we could perform miracles, make happen things that are uncaused. The existence of free will cannot violate causality."

He grimaced at me and I felt stupid. "Yeah, I know all that. But *do* we have the freedom to choose between alternatives?"

"I think we do. Physical conditions make us both the determined and determinators in our own right. Things affect us and we affect them. Determinism goes right down into us, into our consciousness and will, and we send it back out. I couldn't prove it to you without a physiologist, though."

The AI-5 was still running its second completion smoothly. If it succeeded, then it might be that we were living in a universe where even choice among alternatives was an illusion.

Witter looked at me suddenly. "I wonder if our running this program can have an effect on the universe we live in?"

"What are you talking about?" I asked. He seemed to have a mind like a break dancer.

"Maybe our attempting what Gödel said was impossible can change the universe?"

"I don't think so, Felix. But there are other things you might like to consider."

He took a deep breath. "What's that?"

"Well, we began with the idea that no finitary deductive system can complete a rich, self-consistent system. But what if the AI-5 is not a finitary deductive system? Assume it can work outside the limits of the human mind, which is all that Gödel may have charted. It was all he could demonstrate because he had only his own mind to work with."

Witter nodded. "I see what you mean. If our AI reaches completion, then it follows, perhaps, that it's not a finitary deductive system, and we can draw no conclusions about the nature of the universe."

I smiled. "Right. And we don't have to worry about being automatons, or that our sense of inner freedom is a mirror trick of some kind. Free will is a special case of determinism. It's determinism from the inside. The means of determinism are also those of free will."

Witter was watching the screen with a worried look on his face, as if he now expected the AI to fail. It didn't matter one way or the other, if what I had said was true.

"Unconditioned free will would be omnipotence," I continued, "and that's an absurd state to be in. No law, no causal structures. It's just a conceptual extreme, like infinities."

"Something is working against us," Witter said softly.

"What do you mean?"

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He gripped the panel. "It won't come out the same way twice," he replied.

"You're still mistaking the maps for reality," I said.

"Look at the time, you fool! It's almost as long as before. If the AI doesn't repeat its completion in the same time, it will run on forever."

"So what. We have the first completion in memory, step by step, for whatever it's worth."

He swiveled his chair and glared at me. His eyes were bloodshot and had dark circles around them. The whole experiment, I saw, was eating up his entire energy. "You don't give a damn about anything except apportioning time and keeping other administrators happy."

"What are you talking about, Felix? I'm here with you, and we're doing what you wanted. Have you lost your mind?" I almost felt hurt, as if he were questioning my loyalty.

He pointed to the clock on the wall. "Look, time's up and our AI is still running."

"So what? It was a fluke the first time, a mistake. You can't beat Gödel, and it wouldn't matter if you could."

He laughed. "You still don't see!"

"No, I don't."

The AI-5 was still running.

"It will run forever this time. Our decision to run the experiment puts us at a great juncture between possible universes. We collapsed the wave function reaching our minds."

"What are you saying?" I demanded.

"Proving that *our* universe was deterministic threw us into a freer one. Gödel proved his work in the wrong universe. Here the AI will run forever. But if we stop it and start again, something even stranger might happen."

"You're off the deep end now," I said, feeling sorry for him.

"We might be moving across a whole series of universes, drawing closer to the unconditional omnipotence that has the true freedom to be everything. . ."

"Yeah, and can't become anything in particular. That's what I was saying. Witter, wake up. We have the other program. Go see for yourself. That system was completed. In this one there's obviously some kind of difficulty. Neither result means a thing. Get that through your stupid head!" Mathematicians were all idealists to some degree or another, always secretly believing in the literal existence of infinities, numbers, and tortured geometries. Witter was no exception.

He shook his head and smiled. "There's nothing in the memory, Bruno. See for yourself. Go ahead, punch it up."

I leaned forward and punched in the order. Nothing came up. I went into search mode. Still nothing.

"We've left the universe behind," Witter said.

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"It's got to be here," I said.

The screen remained blank.

"You erased the memory!" I shouted.

"I did not," he replied softly, and I knew he was telling the truth.

I glanced at the food cart; it winked out of existence.

"Did you see that?" I asked.

"Bruno!" Witter shouted. "We've escaped a totalitarian cosmos. We're free!"

"Relatively," I said, shaken.

He was looking at me strangely, and I saw that both his eyes were now brown. As the AI-5 continued its endless run into a free infinity, I feared what we would find when we went outside....

EARLY SCIENTIFIC FRAUD:
YOUNG THOMAS EDISON TRIED TO PASS OFF A CONTAINER FILLED WITH FIREFLIES AS AN INCANDESCENT BULB
J. Harris

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Paul Di Filippo ("Stone Lives," August 1985) offers a gripping new story that extrapolates the idea of cosmetic surgery into a technique called biosculpt, which can alter the body as easily as you alter a page of copy on your word processor.

Skintwister

BY
PAUL DI FILIPPO

Keats was wrong.

Beauty is not forever; and alone it is not even enough. Anything permanent is suspect. All is vanity and mutability, flash and eternal change. Fashion is truth, and truth fashion. That is all ye know, and all ye need to know. Society changes daily, hourly, and so must the individual, even if it's to no purpose. As a visionary artist of the last century once sang when filled with ennui, "I wanna change my clothes, my hair—

"—my face."

And the high priests of transformation, those perceived as the almighty trendsetters and arbiters, are in reality its most debased servants, unable to locate their true selves amid the welter of arbitrary changes they foster.

Ask the man who knows.

Yours truly, Dr. Strode.

.....

The girl lay in bed like an anxious madonna. I had forgotten her name. Here at the Strode Clinic, the patients came and went so quickly, and in such numbers, that I often lost track of their individuality. But Maggie Crownover, my head nurse, briefed me before we entered the girl's private room.

"Hana Morrell is next, Doctor," Maggie had said, all brisk efficiency. "She's fourteen, a technician at the Long Island cold-fusion station. Her credit's solid. No organic defects. Strictly a makeover."

"No organic defects" was an understatement. The girl was a perfect beauty.

Propped up on pillows, surrounded by bedside monitors, she nearly stole my breath away. Blonde hair like incandescent light filaments

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framed a heart-shaped face with skin the color of powdered pearls. Her eyes were an arresting gray, her nose had an insouciant tilt, her lips were a feature Rubens might have bestowed on his favorite model.

She smiled, and I thought, *My God, how the hell am I going to improve on this face?*

I extended my hand and we shook, slim hand strong in mine. "Hello, Dr. Strode."

"Ms. Morrell, good morning. I understand you're here for a facial biosculpt." I tried to keep any disapprobation out of my voice. Her credit was all I should be concerned with.

She nodded timidly, as if only in my presence had she realized what she was planning to do.

I spoke quickly and confidently, to get her over this last hump. She had signed the consent form already, and I wasn't about to lose the easy fee she represented by allowing her to vacillate now.

"Let's have a look at your new face, then, shall we."

Maggie took her cue and stepped to the holocaster. A bust formed of light and color suddenly filled the air above the girl's bed, translucent in the bright sunshine that flooded the private room and its luxurious furnishings.

Subtle disappointment welled up in my throat. Like a fool, I had thought that perhaps this girl would be different. Her beauty had misled me into thinking her desires would be commensurate. But she was like all the rest, following the latest trends as helplessly as a surfer caught in a tsunami.

The holo was a woman of vaguely Eurasian/Polynesian features: skin olive-bronze; epicanthic folds around the eyes; strong chin; thin lips; nose rather small; glossy hair jet-black. It had been assembled from stock graphics in real time on the clinic's computer-aided design system, under the direction of the patient. Ever since the amalgamation of Hong Kong into the Hawaiian-Japanese prosperity sphere last year, this face, or something almost identical, had been chosen by 60 percent of my female patients.

"Fine. . . . It will look wonderful on you," I lied. Sick at heart with contemplating the natural beauty I was about to destroy forever, I moved toward her to get the whole thing over with.

"Wait," she said nervously, before I could lay my hands on her face. "Could you just brief me once more on exactly what's going to happen?"

Now I was starting to get annoyed. "I assume you've read the literature the clinic provides, Ms. Morrell. It's all spelled out there."

She smiled wanly, and I buckled.

"O.K. A quick refresher. I am going to peek you and initiate changes in your cells that will, more or less, return selected cells temporarily to an embryonic state."

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Her look of puzzlement made me sigh.

"Ms. Morrell, have you ever considered how you ended up with the face you now possess?"

A negative shake.

"During embryogenesis, your cells differentiated and accumulated in definite patterns. These patterns resulted from the play of energy as it was dissipated into the embryonic environment against various constraints. You might think of a mountain stream pulled along by gravity and being configured by the shape of the streambed and channel and rocks in the flow. Although all individuals share the same cell-adhesion mechanisms, your unique genes dictated the temporal and spatial constraints of your development, and hence your unique morphology. Following me so far?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Very well. What I am about to do is influence your cells directly through Banneker psychokinesis. I am going to reawaken their potential for development — which, as an adult, you have lost. By peeking selected sites, activating cell-loosening enzymes such as trypsin, and planting my own constraints in place of your predetermined genetic ones, I will rebuild your face in the shape you desire."

Naturally bright, she had followed my more elaborate explanation with real understanding, and seemed to be losing her anxiety. "Exactly what's going to happen to my old face?"

I tossed her a bone. "Good question, Hana. Under normal conditions, your epidermis is constantly sloughing off, as new cells are produced subcutaneously and rise to the surface to take the place of the old ones. On the average, a new cell takes a month to migrate to the surface. An extinct disease like psoriasis represents what happens when epidermal replacement occurs more frequently, say in a week. What I am going to provoke in your body is something like that. For roughly a week, you are going to look very ugly indeed, as your old features slough away and the new ones manifest themselves underneath. This is an uncomfortable but entirely safe process, and you will be monitored throughout. Also, I will be making daily adjustments based on how I read the changes. The treatment could even be conducted on an outpatient basis, if the temporary disfigurement weren't so drastic."

But then, I thought, *I wouldn't clean up on daily room charges.*

"Are you gonna have to alter my bones?" she asked.

I considered the holo. "It appears not, although I could, by regulating your osteoblasts and osteoclasts. The face you've chosen goes well with your current skeletal structure."

She opened her rosy lips for another question, but I cut her off, fed up with her vain hesitation. My bedside manner definitely had its rough edges today.

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"Ms. Morrell. Either you want this treatment or you don't. My training consists of eight years at Johns Hopkins and four more at the Banneker Institute itself. I have been running this clinic for ten years and have performed more biosculptures than you have fused atoms. Now, can we proceed? I have other patients to see."

She nodded yes meekly, and I felt the perverse thrill of having another human entirely obedient to my will. I tried to suppress it, but couldn't completely succeed.

Disgusted with myself, I placed my hands on her soon-to-be-lost face.

Then I dove beneath her flesh.

How do you convey extrasensory modes of being in terms of the five senses? I haven't found a way after all these years. It may be impossible. Better minds than mine have tried. Synthesis comes close, offering the feeling of skewed perspectives, of the mundane transformed, but in the end, it, too, fails to capture the reality.

Still, how else can I tell it?

My surroundings vanished. The first thing I tasted was Hana's health and youth, refreshing as the heat of the sun. I could have reveled in it for hours, and had to pull myself away. Her vitality was so different from what the hurt and sick people, the broken ones, had given me in school. That was a taste I couldn't stomach, the reason why I used my talents as I did. Next I went beyond surfaces, to bathe in the noisy cellular automatons I proposed to change. They hummed a blue light like ginger, happy and content in their stubborn ways. I felt the configurations of muscles and bones, swam along the maxillae and up the zygomatic arch to the temporal bone and down to the nasal bone, even unto the cartilage at the tip. When I was certain I knew her face in its entirety, I began to initiate the changes.

A writer I like once proclaimed, "There is no art without resistance of the medium." I was an artist by any standards, and my medium was one of the most recalcitrant. The plastic stuff I worked with had its instructions on how to behave, and resented my intrusions. Membranes squeezed out scintillant sparks against my mental tweaking. Pseudopods of angry noise attempted to push me back. Still, I persisted, knowing the battle would be mine. I ordered growth here, diminishment there. Melanin, marshal your forces and march! Lymph system, retreat! Sebaceous glands, surrender!

At last I was satisfied. I swam out of her skin, back to the external world.

The return of sunlight caused me to blink painfully. I stepped back awkwardly, fatigue heavy in my limbs. Maggie steadied me, anticipating my confusion.

"Wow," Hana said. "What did you do? I feel like ants were crawling under my face."

"Get used to it," I said. "It only

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becomes more intense."

I turned to go. At the door, I stopped, guilty, and said, "Ms. Morrell — I'm sorry if I was rather brusque."

But she didn't even hear me, both hands on her alien face, as she felt the changes massing beneath her forsaken flesh.

Scarves of smoke ghosted the trapped air in the club. Twisting ceilingward, they encountered shafts of colored light that tinged them gaudily, lending them a brief vitality much like life.

Almost everyone in the noisy, crowded room was smoking — both tobacco and California sinsemilla. When a graduate could peek away your lung cancer for more money than a prole made in a year, then smoking — once almost extinct — became yet another exclusive status symbol of the rich.

And we — Jeanine and I — were indeed among the rich tonight.

After a tiring day at the clinic, I had felt I deserved the best night out I could manage. That meant one place: *Radix Malum,* atop the Harlem Pylon. Just the view south from its sweeping windows was worth the inflated prices. Manhattan looked as if some angry god had ripped down the night sky, shaken the stars into geometric patterns, and laid the priceless carpet at our feet.

Jeanine was telling me about her day. I half-listened, sipping my overpriced drink at intervals, letting the alcohol have its way inside me without interference.

"I swear," she said, "These kids I teach are getting smarter every day. Pretty soon they're going to have to lower the franchise again. Can you imagine it at twelve? When we were growing up, I remember everyone said fifteen was too low. What's in that latest release of mnemotropins anyway? Sometimes I can barely keep ahead of my students."

I muttered something about reversing evolution, reverting to the self-sufficiency of most other mammals soon after birth. Truth to tell, I was busy wondering if tonight was going to be the night I dared satisfy my curiosity about Jeanine.

We had met over a year ago, at a party given by one of my clients. From across the room, I had been taken by her radical beauty. Her thick black hair fell in waves to her shoulders. Her long face, with its high cheeks and prominent nose, achieved a composite beauty greater than the sum of its parts. Deep luminous eyes were fringed with the thickest lashes I had ever seen.

My first thought had been: *What genius built that face? I don't recognize the style at all.* Then I muttered aloud, "You cynical bastard. Why can't she be real?"

I had come on to her shamelessly,

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with all the intensity I could muster. Despite my gaucheries, she had seen something attractive in me. That night, upstairs in our host's bedroom, atop a bed piled with coats, we became lovers. She excited me so much that I forgot to dive beneath her skin and search for traces of alterations.

Since then, I had deliberately forborne. She meant too much to me now for me to know another sculptor had swarmed beneath her flesh. But not to know was killing me, too.

I shook my head. Jeanine asked, "'s matter?"

"Nothing," I said. "Just thinking about this crazy world we live in. Why can't things be simpler, like, say, about fifty years ago, when those loopy Kirlian auras and biofeedback were as close as anyone got to the notion of reading and altering bodies like books?"

She took my hand across the real linen cloth. "I've never heard you talk this way before, Jack. You must have had an awful day. Why don't we just head home now?"

That sounded good to me, so we summoned the waiter — a human, of course, not a mek, at these prices — and he arranged the crediting of the restaurant's account, not neglecting his gratuity.

Shuffling between packed tables, we made for the door.

Halfway there, a tug on the hem of my quilted dinner jacket stopped me.

I looked down. A man's choleric, beefy face stared aggressively up at me. He was obviously drunk and belligerent. I thought I knew him, but couldn't remember where from.

He slurred his speech. "If it's not the illushtrious Dr. Strode, demigod and paragon. Sit down with us and have a drink, Doc. Just to show there's no hard feelings about throwing us out of your stinking clinic."

I regarded his companions, one of whom was a thin, dandified man, and it all came back to me.

"Listen," I said, "my policy is not to handle illnesses, especially something as critical as failure of the immune system. I couldn't do anything for your friend."

"Tell the truth, you high and mighty bastard. You *could,* but you *wouldn't!* And every other honest peeker has more cases than they can handle. So now Mitch is on monoclonal antibodies, which are only, like, 80 percent guaranteed. While you waste your talents skintwisting."

"I am a biosculptor, not a 'skintwister,'" I said. Jeanine was pulling at my arm. The restaurant had grown quiet as all heads swiveled.

"I say you're a lousy skintwister," the man said, and started to rise.

I grabbed his shoulder while he was still coming up. His lifeaura stunk of fear and bad living. It took me less than a second to give him a shot of angina that folded him up in a gasping heap. Let him try to prove I had anything to do with it. He had

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the physique where such an attack could be purely natural.

"Let's go," I said to Jeanine.

She stared at me as if I were Satan himself — or at least Faust.

And she wouldn't let me touch her at all that night.

I studied my hands with unnatural calmness. I knew something bad was about to happen.

I felt queer inner tremblings and quiverings. Something prevented me from diving into my own flesh and finding out what was wrong. Instead, like anyone else, I was forced to watch it all from the outside, my own body a mystery.

Immense pain shot up each finger from my wrists. The dorsal surfaces of my hands suddenly blackened, puffed, and split, like pork in an oven, revealing bloody red meat and white phalanges beneath the blistering epidermis. The ruined skin began to fall away in rotten strips, until it hung like a diseased orchid from my carpal bones.

I shot up in bed, my pulse pounding, sweat drenching the sheets. Jeanine wasn't beside me, having left me soon after the scene in the club.

It took me longer than it should to restore my bodily equilibrium, but at last I got my blood pressure down to 110 over 80. I turned on the light then, lit a cigarette, and thought about what had just happened.

One of the first things they made us read at the Banneker Institute — right along with *On the Origin of Forms* — was an old essay by a doctor of the past century named Lewis Thomas, called "On Warts." It was his graceful speculations on how warts could be cured "by something that can only be called thinking." The instructor cited this as one of the seminal pieces in our field. But he directed our attention to one of Thomas's offhand comments that all of us had missed:

"I was glad to think that my unconscious mind would have to take the responsibility for this, for if I had been one of the subjects I would never have been able to do it myself."

"Unlike Thomas," the instructor continued, "you special people are quite capable of taking charge of what were once perceived as autonomic functions managed by the unconscious. I can tell you from my own experience that the urge to meddle constantly in your own body will prove to be an almost irresistible one. I have one word of advice for you: don't.

"Your unconscious, properly trained, is completely capable of monitoring and policing your body with more efficiency than your rational self. We will see to it that you receive such training. After it, you will function at the peak of health for more years than we have yet put a number to. All provided, of course, that you

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give up any incessant tinkering that is sure to do more harm than good. It is a prime paradox of our profession that while we exercise complete control over the bodies of others, we must practice a certain powerlessness over our own, lest we be caught up in a destructive feedback loop of incremental changes.

"One of the little side benefits of a trained unconscious, I think you will be surprised to learn, is the suppression of nightmares . . ."

I hadn't had a nightmare in over a decade. Dreams, yes, but nothing like this bloody vision that had shattered the night for me. I couldn't afford to. They were the mark of an unconscious at war with itself, at least in people such as myself. They were bound to result in malfunctioning of my careful homeostasis.

Lying back, I ran through a dozen mind-cleansing techniques before falling asleep again.

I had no more bad dreams that night.

But in the morning my hands were sore and stiff.

Most days I was reasonably proud of my office. The diplomas and AMA citations hanging on the real-wood paneled walls; the thick burgundy carpet; the mahogany sideboard holding antique objets d'art and a jagged crystal from the Russian settlement on Mars (I had had to perform four nose jobs and two breast-lifts for that alone); the holo of the Banneker Institute, a building evoking instant recognition and respect. The whole effect was one of serenity, calmness, and prestige, intended to put prospective patients at ease.

This morning, after the horrors of last night, it seemed a tawdry stage set. I wanted to kick the cardboard walls down and flee. But of course I couldn't. I had my practice, my reputation, and my self-respect to consider.

Or at least two out of those three.

Dealing with the woman sitting on the other side of my desk was not making the day any more agreeable.

It wasn't arrogance or hauteur on her part that was getting under my skin; I had encountered those often enough to have quick and effective ripostes at my fingertips. Instead she exhibited a kind of scatterbrained ditziness that was giving me a headache. Every question I asked seemed to elicit a senseless torrent of references to people and events I couldn't possibly know or care about. All I needed was a straight answer to what she wanted done with her body. Instead I got her social diary for the past six months.

Her lack of wits appeared an even greater shame when I considered her looks.

If the Winged Victory had survived the centuries with its face intact, I'm sure it would have looked something like this woman. A classic, aquiline profile complemented her

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long, slender neck. Her eyes were penetrating but essentially empty, like a cat's. Her platinum hair was feathered close to her magnificent occipital structure. She wore fur and silk like a queen.

I let her wind up her latest reply without really paying attention. My life seemed suddenly full of women lately. Jeanine; the girl, Hana, whom I had found myself thinking of all morning; and now this personage — Amy Sanjour, she had named herself. I supposed I had always favored the company of women over men. Was it because I found them easier to dominate? Jeanine's frigid treatment last night and Hana's ineluctable haunting of my thoughts seemed to portend a table-turning in the works.

"Ms. Sanjour," I said when she ran out of breath, "I believe your problem is a general lassitude." I had fastened on this recurrent leitmotiv in her rambling discourse.

"Why, yes," she gushed. "How perceptive of you, Dr. Strode. That's my trouble exactly. I just can't seem to keep up with all the things that I have to do. Parties, charity affairs, travel— it's all too wearing lately."

"I prescribe a general toning," I said, calculating how much she was good for. "I'll work over your muscles, maybe boost your ATP production — Can you arrange to check in tomorrow for about a week?"

Her face was so transparent that I could almost watch her running over her appointment book in her head. When her forehead wrinkles disappeared, she said, "Absolutely, Doctor. My health comes before anything else. I simply have to get back on my feet."

"Fine." I stood to escort her to the door. She rose like a flower unfolding in stop-motion photography. Her expensive scent filled my nostrils. What a sorry mismatch of beauty and brains.

At the door, she offered her hand.

I didn't know any better, so I took it.

The room seemed to invert itself and reform faster than light. I caught my breath and shook my head, plainly dazed.

"Are you all right, Doctor?" she asked, solicitous as a nurse.

"Uh, yeah, I guess. I had a bad night. Probably not quite recovered yet. It's nothing, really."

She smiled dazzingly. "Well, don't work too hard. I'll be needing you tomorrow."

"I'll take care," I said.

Then she left.

On the way to Hana Morrell's room, I initiated a quick internal diagnostic on myself. Everything seemed fine. Yet if nothing else, the memory of my shredding hands still remained, an unexplained abnormality.

Maggie was waiting by Hana's bedside. As I came up, she finished explaining how to use a terminal mounted on a swivel arm that projected over Hana's bed. IV tubes

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threaded the girl's arm. Her face—

No matter how many times I saw it, I was always taken aback by the overnight transformation. People—most of them quite good-looking but unsatisfied — came to me, I laid my hands on them, and they turned temporarily into something resembling plague victims.

Already a scaly scurf overlaid Hana's lumpy features. No more was she the beauty who had occupied the bed yesterday. Clumps of her hair bestrewed her pillow, the old falling out to make way for the new.

"Hana, how are we feeling?"

"O.K. Weird, but basically O.K."

"In that case, I'm going to go forward with your treatment. Ms. Crownover's explained the idiosyncracies of our network hookup, I see. You'll be communicating your wishes and needs through that now. I'm going to paralyze your vocal chords for the remainder of your stay here. It's simply to remove the temptation to talk. No sense straining your facial muscles while they're reforming. As for eating — they've already got you on your gourmet menu."

She eyed her IV and laughed. "Right."

"O.K., then. I'm going in."

My hands cradled her abused flesh.

The diving was rough today. I felt swept away by the turbid currents of her transitional self. I had to exert all my powers to manage a simple reading of the progress of the changes. Making the minor adjustments necessary was almost more than I could accomplish. Her larynx fought me like a malignant snake. I got out of her susurrant, scarlet-spicy interior awkwardly, in a hurry.

I mumbled something about seeing her tomorrow, and hurried off.

Later in the day, when Maggie asked me if anything was wrong, I told her roughly just to tend to her end of the business.

She was too professional to cry in front of me.

But I learned of it after.

Naked, Amy Sanjour differed from Victory in one respect: no wings.

This was the one body I was glad I didn't have to amend. Contemplating her elegant contours as she dressed unselfconsciously in one of the clinic's white robes, I found familiar thoughts running through my mind.

Why was it that every advance in man's powers seemed to lessen his regard for the accomplishments of nature? As soon as the first cathedral was finished, the forest began to seem puny. The airplane made an eagle's accomplishments paltry. Each city canyon decreased the grandeur of the Grand Canyon or the Valles Marineris by a perceptible amount. The ability to mold the body made what left the womb unsatisfactory. You would think just the reverse would be true. After struggling so hard to achieve his small

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skills, man should appreciate the effortless workings of nature even more. But such was not the case.

And who was I to alter affairs?

"I was going to suggest some cosmetic attention to your epidermis, in conjunction with toning," I said as she sat down on her bed. "But I can see it won't be necessary, Ms. Sanjour."

"Please, call me Amy. If I'm going to spend a week here, it would be tiresome for you to be always 'Mizzing' me."

"That seems like no problem—Amy. Have you made the tour of our facilities yet?"

"Yes. The pool is splendid, and so's the gym. I really feel at home here. I think this week will turn out to be just what I've been needing."

"I hope so. Maybe you'll recommend the clinic to your friends. Now, shall we begin?"

She reclined wordlessly, her legs primly crossed at the ankles, yet somehow managing to convey a sense of wanton invitation.

With restraint, I managed to touch her quite neutrally on the shoulders. An affair with one of my patients would have the Review Board down on me in seconds.

I hesitated for a moment before leaving the external world behind. I still remembered the unexplained vertigo that had followed my last contact with this woman. Was there a cause-and-effect relationship I was missing, or had it been strictly coincidence?

Time to find out, I figured.

I dipped tentatively beneath her surface.

Almost instantly I popped back out.

"What quack did this to you?" I demanded.

"Did what?" she asked, seemingly genuinely puzzled.

"Your muscles are pouring out fatigue poisons. You may as well be running a daily marathon. No wonder your energy's down."

"I was seeing a psychokineticist for a time. I prefer not to name names, though. He's a friend of the family. I can't believe he's responsible."

"It's the only explanation. He should have his license revoked." Only then did I remember clutching the heart of the man in the restaurant. I swallowed my hypocrisy, tasting bitter gall. That had been different, hadn't it? I was provoked, and drunk. Surely mitigating circumstances.

"Can't you just restore things, without knowing how they got that way? I won't go back to him — I promise."

"It's unethical — but without your cooperation, I don't see what else I can do."

"That's that, then. Let's go on."

I went into her secret self of raucous tissues and proud bones once more, and began the repairs. So demanding were they that I had to exercise greater concentration than I

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had called upon in years. Time passed in a quantumless blur.

Exiting, I anticipated the vertigo I had experienced at our first contact.

It wasn't there. But instead I felt a queer inner disturbance, as if, while rewiring Amy, some unseen individual had been busy inside *me.*

"That felt wonderful, Doctor," she said with a smile.

Have you ever felt something slipping away from you and been unable to stop it? Perhaps a lover became unexplainably cold, without a reason you could discern. (If you knew what was wrong, you *would* change, wouldn't you?) If you're an artist, perhaps you felt your powers waning in inexplicable ways, as if fleeing misuse. (Could it be the drinking, the carousing, the hack work?) Or maybe it was nothing as easy to finger as these examples. Maybe it was just a diffuse sense of losing your grip on life, of becoming something you swore you'd never be.

I think you'll know what I mean now if I tell you this was how I felt during that period that coincided with Amy's stay at the clinic. My mind felt like a dusty bottle of forgotten wine in a cellar no one would ever visit again. I made the rounds of my patients with such an absentminded, distracted air that I'm surprised none of them got up and left, rather than entrust themselves to such sloppy care.

Cautiously, I plumbed my own depths at intervals, trying to ascertain the source of my troubles. A malfunctioning unconscious? There had been no more bad dreams. Something wrong in an objective physiological sense? If so, it was nothing I could pinpoint with my talents, a loss of focus more subtle than anything I could name.

I fought not to let it interfere with my work, with mixed results. Amy's progress seemed to be fine, her body gradually regaining normal functioning. I was proud of catching and reversing deliberate damage, and I found myself visiting her twice as often as necessary, performing the laying on of hands more than she actually needed to continue mending. I told myself it was innocent and motivated solely by the pleasure I took in wallowing in her healthy aura. She was a pleasantly cooperative patient, and I had experienced no more untoward side effects after diving her vibrant flesh.

Other cases were not going so well. Hana's, for instance. Hers was the only full facial biosculpt I happened to have that week. I don't think I could have handled another. As it was, I barely handled hers. I began to treat her in a perfunctory manner. Are the melanocytes doing their job to get her complexion the right shade? Good, let's get out. A little malformation in the mandibular area? Tweak it fast and forget about it. Why was I acting so unprofession-

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ally toward Hana? I asked myself at lucid intervals: Did I resent her willful and vain decision to replace her natural beauty with a product of the fashion marketplace? I had had no such compunctions about similar cases, and could hardly afford them anyway, being one of those responsible for encouraging such trade.

After a few days I deliberately ignored the dilemma. I went on like a talented zombie, reaming out the atherosclerotic arteries of the self-indulgent, dissolving adipose tissue, killing hair follicles in inconvenient places.

The outside world seemed to be conspiring to remind me of what I was, and had forsaken. There was a disaster in one of the orbital factories; hundreds injured, including the resident physician. Medical volunteers were needed. I didn't respond. Workers dismantling an archaic fission reactor received inadvertent rad overdoses. Repairing the cell damage required the talents of many peekers. I turned the sound lower for the rest of the newscast.

One morning I was sitting alone in my office, dreaming that my talent worked on inorganic matter instead of living substances alone. What would I do then? Turn lead to gold? Make a fortune at the roulette wheel? Anything had to be better than what I was doing now.

The door opened without warning, and Maggie hurried in, concern written plain on her face.

"Doctor, I think you'd better come at once. It's Ms. Morrell. Something's happened overnight."

Together we rushed to her room.

Hana's racking sobs greeted us at the door. Lacking a mirror, she was running her frantic hands over the ruins of her face.

All my work had been undone somehow. Instead of the porcelain-figurine features that yesterday had been almost finished, loose folds of corrugated skin hung in obscene draperies and convolutions. It looked as if someone had melted a plastic doll with a torch.

"Oh, my Christ," I swore, my stomach turning inside out.

"I get readings indicative of a massive disturbance of the lymph system," Maggie said. "Almost like elephantiasis."

Through her wails, out of her swollen lips, Hana cried, "Doctor, do something!"

But I couldn't bring myself to touch her.

The man removed his hands from my face.

"Someone's been walking all through you like you were a public park," he said.

That was the last thing I had expected to hear when I had called in one of my colleagues. Madness, some strange virus, poisoning — a hundred

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implausible explanations had thronged my brain. Everything but the truth.

"Just what the hell do you mean?"

He regarded me with a minimum of cold sympathy. "Exactly what I said. One of us has been peeking you like a patient, and there was no way you could see it for yourself. Once he got in the first time, he set up dozens of blocks on your own talents, forbidding corrective measures or even recognition of trouble. After that he had free run of all your systems. And what a massive tangle he caused! It was very elegant work — some of the best I've ever seen. The goal seems to have been not to totally disable your skills, but rather to misdirect and ball them up. I'm surprised you didn't kill someone, you were so screwed up."

I couldn't believe it. But I had to. What else could it be?

"So I caused the girl's disfigurement?"

"Damn right. Toward the end of her treatment, every move you made had an unpredictable result, almost as if you willed your hand to scratch your nose and found yourself raising your foot."

"Did you calm her down and start repairs?"

"Yes. And I think I managed to convince her to keep quiet about the whole thing. I had to promise you'd refund your fee and compensate her for any missed time at work."

"Good. And me?"

"I restored everything I could spot. And with the blocks on your inner perceptions removed, you should be able to handle any residual cleanup."

"I owe you," I said, getting up to accompany him out.

"Just find out who did this to you, and stop him. We can't tolerate a rogue."

I thought I could find out who, all right.

But what could possibly be the answer to why?

That night, clutching Jeanine tightly as she slept, I craved some certainty in my life. I penetrated her essential self, reading the record of her cells, searching for the imprint of past manipulation on gross morphological scales.

All of my best efforts revealed no such tampering. She was as life alone had made her. But could I have any certainty in the result? Were my talents truly restored? How would I ever be certain of anything again?

The night seemed like an endless cave without egress or a safe corner, Jeanine's body a cold stone corpse, petrified by millennia of slow mineral drips.

As the registered physician of Amy Sanjour, I had a limited access to her datafiles. I couldn't get to her financial records or voting history, but certain innocuous biographical data that might have a bearing on her treatment were mine to command.

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I brought up her employment history. The current entry read UNEMPLOYED. That much I had known. She had counted on me looking no further, and I had unwittingly obliged. I scrolled forward now to the next entry, backward in time.

PSYCHOKINETICIST, GRADUATED BANNEKER INSTITUTE 2045. SPECIALTY: NEUROPATHOLOGY. ABANDONED PRACTICE 2053 FOR PERSONAL REASONS . . .

That bitch. But why?

I went hastily through the rest of her files, looking desperately for some motivation. At last I came to one entry whose significance hovered at the edge of my understanding like a moth batting at a screen:

SISTER, ELIZABETH SANJOUR, BORN 2029, DIED 2053. CAUSE OF DEATH: INTERNAL HEMMORHAGING INCURRED IN SKIING ACCIDENT.

Skiing, I thought coldly, recalling what I had tried so desperately to forget . . .

Med school was so easy. I had always been a quick study, sharp and bright, and the chemistry and anatomy, dissection and lab work were a snap. When I tested positive on the Banneker exam, I was carrying a straight 4.0. Entrance to the institute was guaranteed.

Even in the first few months there, I had no trouble. I remember how they started us on bacterial colonies and little quivering cubes of vatflesh, where our amateur psychic probes could cause no irreparable damage. Those initial forays into the mysteries of living tissue, combined with the new mastery over my own body, were heady experiences. I felt like God himself. When we were ready, they brought in the sick ones. I was eager to show what I could do, to cure and heal like a beneficent deity.

I can't explain why I had such an adverse reaction to the tainted auras of anyone suffering severe traumas or illnesses. It was the last thing I had been expecting. All I know is that when I dove the flesh of the cancerous, the mutilated, the dying, I lost all my nerve. Forgetting all I had learned, I floundered amidst their gaudy, excessive pain, as inept as a norm. I came out of their bloody shells shaking, tachycardia thundering in my chest, the requisite work barely done. I tried to hide it, but my instructors eventually found out. No therapy worked to cure me. I graduated only with the tacit understanding that I would enter biosculpture.

That was why, when I came down the expert slope at Innsbruck and found the beautiful woman wrapped moaning around the pine tree, blood leaking from her mouth and staining the snow an unholy color, I just kept going, making for the lodge, where I notified the staff doctor, a norm. But by the time he and the rescue team coptered in, she was dead.

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I had thought no one at the lodge knew who I was.

But I had been wrong.

She rested peacefully in bed. When I entered, she sat up and brightened, donning her mask of brainlessness. She opened her mouth to utter some silly remark. But something on my own face must have told her the game was up. Her beautiful features underwent such a transformation that she looked like a new, more savage person.

With malicious spite, she asked, "How are you feeling, Dr. Strode?"

"Listen, Amy—"

"Don't soil my name, you murderer!" she spat.

A burst of anger shot through me. What the fuck did she know about me and my life? Did she think I liked living with the knowledge of what I was? She had almost ruined what little beauty I had painfully ransomed from the hard and transient world, and all for selfish revenge for something I couldn't have altered.

As if reading my thoughts, she said, "You could have tried to save her, you crud. But instead you just zipped by."

I lost control then, and my hands went for her throat. I put no pressure on it, though.

Not on the outside.

If she knew my body from a week of sabotage, I knew hers from a week of loving treatment. Entrance was as easy as slipping into an old shoe. I knew that she was diving my flesh at the same time, eager for the kill. But my unconscious defenses were restored now, and I left my safety to them.

Now she was going to learn just how good her own were.

I swam her noisy arteries, heading for her heart. She stopped me in the atrium, where a squad of bright lights chased me off with lemon fire. I shot her gallbladder, and squeezed burning bile into her duodenum. Before she could find me, I was up in her lungs, collapsing alveoli. She caught up with me there, and I barely escaped. I raced toward her brain, hoping to overload her synapses. A blockade was in place, a thorny mesh of blue hatred, and I had to be content with loosening her teeth in their sockets. I managed to snap a ligament in her shoulder on the way south. Lord knew what she was doing to me.

For an indefinite time the battle raged, each thrust of mine being met with a swift reaction from her. Every inch of bloody ground I gained was recaptured by her prowess. I knew, simply from the fact that I wasn't dead yet, that my own defenses must have been holding up as well.

At last, in wordless concert, admitting the stalemate, we disengaged.

I returned to a body in deep pain. The room swirled as I hauled myself unsteadily off her recumbent form. My limbs were puffy with edemas,

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and I was pretty sure one knee was broken. I wasn't up to rationally cataloging the rest of the damage. My unconscious had its immediate work cut out. Already it was snapping pain-blocks into place.

Amy looked no better. Her face was webbed with burst capillaries, and one hand hung awkwardly from a shattered wrist I didn't even remember attacking.

As we eyed each other suspiciously, something like remorse stole over us, as we realized the full extent of our transgressions. Two physicians, bound by a sentimental, implacable oath half as old as civilization, trying to kill each other. Whatever had driven us evaporated — or at least subsided.

"I could make a lot of trouble for you with the authorities," I finally said.

"And me for you."

"So where does that leave us?"

She was silent for some time. Grudgingly, she said, "You're pretty good."

"You, too," I admitted.

"What the hell do you get out of this work?" she asked, waving her good arm to encompass the clinic.

I shrugged. "A living."

She nodded, calculations plain behind her gorgeous eyes.

I couldn't think of anything else to say, so I kept my mouth shut.

Just when the silence seemed to stretch to the breaking point, she spoke.

"I don't forgive you, Strode, but—"

"Yes?"

"Maybe I can help."

Coming soon

Next month: Two inventive new SF stories from two of F&SF's long time contributors: "Midnight Snack" by **Vance Aandahl** and "Strangers On Paradise" by **Damon Knight**.

Soon: new stories from **Ian Watson, Gerald Jonas, R. Bretnor, John Brunner, Michael Bishop, Michael Shea, Lucius Shepard, Rudy Rucker, Robert F. Young** and many others. The April issue is on sale March 3.

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SUPERSTAR

I'm a member of the Dutch Treat Club, all of the members of which are active, in some way, in the field of communications. (I write.) We meet once a week for lunch and conviviality. During the eight non-summer months, we also add a bit of entertainment, and some edification in the form of an improving lecture.

Once the entertainment failed and I got a hurry-up call the night before the meeting.

Could I stand up and entertain on this short notice?

Well, I can sing a little bit and I'm utterly unselfconscious, so I said, "Sure!"

Came the next day at lunch, and when entertainment time arrived, I arose, and there was strong and instant suspicion among the audience. To make it worse, I cheerfully announced that I was going to sing all four stanzas of "The Star-Spangled Banner," even the third stanza, which had been officially eradicated for the crime of being too nasty to our good friends, the British, whom it describes, collectively, by the loving expression, "hireling and slave."

The Dutch Treaters do not stand on ceremony. They love our national anthem, but every single one of them was under the clear impression that he had heard it often enough in the course of ordinary life. There was no need to be "entertained" with it. I

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was therefore the recipient of loud groans and hisses.

I stood my ground unperturbed. I knew my Dutch Treaters. They could sing the first line of the first stanza, and knew an occasional additional phrase here and there. They were totally unaware of the existence of three more stanzas, however, and they knew nothing about the story behind the poem. I aimed to teach them.

I told them the stirring story. It dealt with the British three-pronged offensive of 1814 that threatened to destroy the young United States only 31 years after it had been recognized as independent by Great Britain. And the fate of America boiled down to whether Fort McHenry in Baltimore harbor would be taken or not, whether the night's bombardment by the British fleet would end with the star-spangled banner still flying over it — or not.

I prefaced each stanza with the necessary explanation and then sang it very clearly so that all the words could be heard. (I made life hard for the poor accompanist, however. I'm not a professional singer, and I casually sang each stanza in a different key.)

When I finished the fourth stanza on a sustained and triumphant note, the same audience that had scoffed at the start rose in a spontaneous standing ovation such as I have rarely experienced. I am convinced that, in an access of patriotism of an intensity they had never before experienced, those world-weary and jaded elderly gentlemen would have, one and all, marched to the nearest recruiting center and tried to enlist, if I had thought of suggesting it.

Afterward, when I thought the matter over, it seemed to me that my certainty that I could put the thing over arose out of my experience with these F & SF science essays. I am ready to discuss anything, however old-hat it might seem to a reasonably sophisticated readership, simply because I am confident I can present it with an interesting slant.

Once, when I devoted a couple of essays to polar exploration, a reader wrote to tell me he suspected I had got it all out of some grade-school geography, but that he had found it good reading somehow.

Well, that's my job, so let's get on with it.

Last year, I talked about the smallest stars (THE RULE OF THE NUMEROUS SMALL, June 1985), so it is only reasonable that I should now deal with the largest stars.

I'll start with the Sun, the only star close enough to be seen by the eye (or by the telescope, for that matter) as anything but a dot of light.

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By Earthly standards, the Sun is an enormous object. The Earth's mean diameter is 12, 742 kilometers, and if we set that value equal to 1, then the diameter of Jupiter, the giant planet of our Solar system, is 11.18. The diameter of the Sun, however, by that same standard, is 109.2 (or 9.77 times the diameter of Jupiter).

If we consider the volume of the Earth (just over a trillion cubic kilometers) as equal to 1, then the volume of Jupiter is just under 1400. If Jupiter were hollow, 1400 Earths could be dropped into it, if they were all squashed tightly together. The volume of the Sun, however, is just over 1,300,000 on that basis, so that if the Sun were hollow, well over 900 Jupiters could be dropped into it.

One more thing. Let's set the mass of the Earth (about 6 trillion trillion kilograms) equal to 1. In that case, Jupiter's mass is 317.83 and the Sun's mass is 332,865.

The total mass of all the material moving about the Sun — all the planets, satellites, asteroids, comets, and meteoric material — comes to 448.0 on the Earth = 1 standard. That means that the Sun's mass is 743 times all the rest of the Solar system put together. Another way of saying this is that the Sun makes up 99.866 percent of all the mass of the Solar system.

But never mind comparing the Sun to the planets. That's comparing a monstrous giant to insignificant pygmies. How does the Sun compare to other stars? There, things might seem very different.

Let's start with the hundred nearest stars. They are close enough so that we are reasonably sure we know them all. If we tried to pick a hundred stars in some region that was relatively distant, the smaller ones might be too dim to see and we would end up with a skewed sample.

Of the 100 nearest stars, 97 are distinctly smaller than the Sun. One is about the same size as the Sun, and that is Alpha Centauri A, the larger of the Alpha Centauri double-star system.

Only 2 of the 100 nearest stars are more massive than the Sun. One is Procyon, whose mass (if we set the Sun's mass equal to 1) is 1.77, and the other is Sirius, whose mass is 2.31.

If the nearest stars are a fair sample of the whole (and they might be), then our Sun is outdone in mass by only 2 percent of the other stars.

Does that mean that the Sun is a monster star, and that we should look upon it as a giant?

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No! We would be looking at things the wrong way.

Thus, there are only five bodies in the Solar system that are larger than the Earth: the Sun, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune. Among the bodies smaller than the Earth are four planets, several dozen satellites, a hundred thousand asteroids, a hundred billion comets, and countless trillions of meteoric fragments. Yet surely that doesn't mean that the Earth is an object of monstrous size.

That there are so many objects smaller than Earth is only an example of the "rule of the numerous small" that I discussed in my earlier essay. Despite the many smaller bodies, the existence of one Sun is sufficient to make it clear that Earth is a tiny object.

In the same way, it doesn't matter how few stars there are that are more massive than the Sun. What counts is how *much* more massive than the Sun some stars might be. If there are even a few that are much more massive than the Sun, we would have to look upon the Sun as a relatively small body.

Measuring the mass of a star is not easy. It is best done if the strength of its gravitational field can be measured, for that is proportionate to its mass. And that can be measured if there is a nearby body that responds to that gravitational field. From the nature of the response, we can determine the mass of the star.

Thus, in the case of binary stars, we have the two stars circling a common center of gravity. If we know the distance of the binary, and can therefore calculate the distance between the two stars from their apparent separation, then we can use the distance of the binary and its period of revolution to obtain the total mass of the two stars. From the comparative size of the two orbits we can determine the mass of each.

Fortunately, more than half the stars in the sky are parts of binary systems. Procyon and Sirius are members of binary systems, and they should be referred to as Procyon A and Sirius A, since each is more massive than its companion. In the case of these two stars, the companions, Procyon B and Sirius B, are white dwarfs.

For the moment, however, never mind mass. Another way of comparing stars is by how intensely they radiate. By this, I don't mean how bright they appear to be in the sky. That depends on their distance from us as well as upon the amount of radiation they deliver. A star can shine very brightly indeed and be so far from us as to be totally invisible even with the use of a telescope. On the other hand, a star can shine rather dimly but be so close to us as to make a brave show in the sky.

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If we know the distance of various stars, however, we can make allowance for that distance, and calculate how much light each particular star would deliver if all were at the same standard distance from us. This level of brightness is called "luminosity."

The Sun doesn't do badly as far as luminosity is concerned. Of the hundred nearest stars, only two are distinctly more luminous than the Sun, and they happen to be the two that are also distinctly more massive: Procyon and Sirius. If we set the luminosity of the Sun equal to 1, then the luminosity of Procyon is about 5.8, and that of Sirius is about 23.

Is this relationship between high mass and high luminosity significant? After all, there might be many reasons why a star could be particularly luminous. Luminosity might depend on chemical composition, on internal turbulence, on magnetic field intensity, on the rate of rotation, and so on. It might even be that several different properties of a star might each contribute and that luminosities would vary from star to star in a bewildering manner.

In 1916, the English astronomer Arthur Stanley Eddington (1882-1944) began to work on this problem. He considered voluminous stars first. These were of low average densities and, he felt, considering their high surface temperatures, they might be gaseous throughout. There were certain "gas laws" established experimentally on Earth, and the use of these gas laws might help explain what would happen to a volume of gas with the mass of a large star.

Eddington reasoned there would be one force pulling the gas together — gravitation. There would be two forces acting to keep the gas from being pulled together — gas pressure and radiation pressure.

As gravity pulls the star together, gas pressure rises, but so does gas temperature. In fact, following the gas laws, the temperature at the centers of stars must reach the millions of degrees. As the temperature goes up, the amount of radiation emitted and, therefore, the radiation pressure, must go up, too, and very rapidly.

In the end, Eddington obtained an equation that related mass and luminosity. The higher the mass, the greater the gas and radiation pressure required to keep the star at an equilibrium size; and the greater the radiation pressure, the more brightly the star shone. It seemed that luminosity depended entirely on the mass of a star.

Eddington announced the mass-luminosity law in 1924, and, by that time, he found that ordinary stars like the Sun and even dwarf stars also

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fit the relationship. From this, the conclusion was reached that all stars were gaseous throughout even when their average density was, as in the case of our own Sun, equal to that of liquid water on Earth, and when the density of the Sun's center was much higher still.

The density of the center of the Sun is about five times as great as that of platinum on Earth. By Eddington's time, however, it was known that the mass of an atom is concentrated in the much smaller nucleus at its center. It was clear, then, that under the pressures at the Sun's center, atoms broke down and that the atomic nuclei moved about freely amid a sea of loose electrons.

The nuclei could be distributed much more thickly in such a sea than as part of intact atoms. For that reason, density could be very high and yet the freedom of motion of the ultra-tiny nuclei would be such that this "degenerate matter" would still behave as a gas.

Even white dwarfs, which are virtually all degenerate matter, behave as though they are gaseous. It is only when we get down to neutron stars that this rule fails and that we get a body as massive as a star that acts as though it were a solid.

Eddington's mass-luminosity law applies particularly to stars on the main-sequence (stable, hydrogen-fusing stars like our Sun). According to this law, luminosity varies as about the 3.5th power of the mass. In other words, if you consider a star with twice the mass of the Sun, it would have a luminosity of about 12 times that of the Sun, give or take a bit. A star with three times the mass of the Sun would have a luminosity of about 50 times that of the Sun, and so on.

This has one important consequence that can be seen at once. The more luminous a star, and the more radiation it is emitting, the more hydrogen it must be fusing in order to produce that radiation.

Suppose a star is 3 times as massive as the Sun. It has, then, 3 times the fuel supply. Since it is expending that fuel supply at 50 times the rate the Sun does, it uses up its greater fuel supply in 3/50 or, roughly, 1/17 the time the Sun does.

A star need only fuse about a tenth of its hydrogen supply before its center begins to fuse helium. The star then leaves the main sequence and begins to expand into a "red giant," In a comparatively short time thereafter it will collapse into a white dwarf, neutron star, or black hole depending upon its mass. A star with the mass of the Sun will remain on the main sequence for about 10 billion years. (The Sun's stay on the main sequence is now nearly half over, in other words.) A star with a

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mass three times that of the Sun will stay on the main sequence only a little over half a billion years, because of the prodigal way in which it must fuse its hydrogen supply.

The more massive a star, then, the shorter its normal lifetime. The smallest stars on the main sequence will keep on dribbling out their radiation in small amounts for 200 billion years or more.

On the other hand, a star that is 50 times the mass of the Sun will, by Eddington's mass-luminosity law, stay on the main sequence only 10,000 years, a mere eyeblink on the astronomical time-scale.

You can see, then, why there are so few stars more massive than the Sun. Not only are more massive bodies formed in fewer numbers than less massive ones by the rule of numerous small, but those massive bodies that are formed vanish more quickly into collapse and dimness, and the more massive they are, the more quickly they vanish. If we can see a star right now that is 50 times the mass of the Sun, we would expect, by Eddington's mass-luminosity law, that it was probably formed during historic times and that, in a few thousand years, it will have collapsed.

A second consequence of Eddington's law is that the greater the mass of the star, the greater the forces pulling inward and pushing outward, and the less leeway there is in the equilibrium. A little shift one way or the other in small stars would involve a relatively small excess of force. The star would quiver a bit, then come back to equilibrium. (The Sun may have its quivers, but even though it is fairly massive, the quivers have never been enough to wipe out life on Earth — and it wouldn't take much of a quiver to do that.)

On the other hand, as we consider stars that are more and more massive, little shifts involve larger and larger excesses of force. Eventually, just the normal quivers you might expect would be enough to drive a star into collapse or into explosion. Either way, it would no longer exist as a normal star. Eddington himself thought that a star that was some 50 times the mass of the Sun was about as large as a star could get and still maintain a reasonable equilibrium. This might be called the "Eddington limit."

Here is a list of some notable stars in our own section of the Galaxy that are more luminous even than Sirius, and for each I have roughly calculated the mass on the basis of Eddington's law:

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star	luminosity (Sun = 1)	mass (Sun = 1)
Pollux	30	2.6
Vega	48	3.0
Spica	570	6.1
Alpha Crucis	910	7.0
Beta Centauri	1300	9.5
Canopus	5200	11.5
Deneb	6300	12.2
Rigel	23,000	17.5

Far in the southern sky (invisible to people in the latitudes of Europe and of the northern United States) is the constellation of Dorado (the Goldfish). In that constellation is the Large Magellanic Cloud, the nearest galaxy to our own. We can see considerable detail in it, including a star more luminous than any in our neighborhood of our own Galaxy. It is invisible to the unaided eye, but the Large Magellanic Cloud is 55,000 parsecs away. Allowing for that enormous distance, we can see that S Doradus must be 480,000 times as luminous as the Sun and must have a mass of about 40 times that of our Sun. It nears Eddington's limit.

It seems then that there are stars that may be 50 times the mass of the Sun, and that the Sun is, in turn, about 10 times more massive than the dimmest stars. From that it would seem that our Sun is, at best, only a middle-sized star and that is what it is usually considered to be.

There is a catch, though. Eddington's upper limit is undoubtedly too conservative. In 1922, two years *before* Eddington had announced his mass-luminosity law, a Canadian astronomer, John Stanley Plaskett (1865-1941), discovered that a certain apparently unremarkable star was a binary. It turned out that each star is from 65 to 75 times as massive as the Sun, and each one may be about 2,500,000 times as luminous as the Sun.

This binary, called "Plaskett's twins" (a more dramatic name than the official "HD 47129"), if put in place of the Sun would probably vaporize the Earth in short order. Earth would have to circle Plaskett's twins at a distance 55 times the average distance of Pluto from the Sun (that is, 1/100 of a parsec) in order to reduce the total radiation received to that which we now get from the Sun. And even so, it would kill us, for the light from Plaskett's twins would be much, much higher in

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ultraviolet and x-rays than the light of our Sun is.

The existence of Plaskett's twins enforced a rise in Eddington's limit to a mass of about 70 times that of the Sun, a limit given in "The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of Astronomy," an excellent book that was published in 1977.

During the 1970's, however, the physics of large stars was reworked, making use of knowledge gained since Eddington's time. Turbulence within a star, for instance, plays a much greater role than had been thought. Then, too, there is a continuous and appreciable loss of mass from large stars through stellar winds, a phenomenon unknown in Eddington's time.

Neither turbulence nor mass-loss invalidates the mass-luminosity law (which, after all, is backed not only by theory, but by careful observation). It does, however, raise Eddington's limit to surprisingly high values, making it clear that the stability and life-span of "very massive stars" is greater than had earlier been expected.

There had been reports of such very massive stars (or "superstars," as I like to call them) with masses more than 100 times that of the Sun, but in view of Eddington's low limit, such reports were received with the greatest skepticism. However, once the theory had been adjusted to allow the existence of superstars, a number have been reported, and it may be that one star out of two billion might be a superstar of more than 100 times the mass of our Sun. That means that there could be 100 or 150 superstars in our Galaxy alone.

Some particular superstars have been identified. In my essay READY AND WAITING (February 1983), I referred to a peculiar star, Eta Carinae, as unusually unstable and therefore very possibly the next supernova. At that time, I had not yet caught up to the notion of superstars (trying to keep up with all of science is exhausting and incredibly frustrating), but now my impression is that Eta Carinae owes its peculiarities more to its being a superstar than to being a pre-supernova.

As long ago as 1970, there were reports that Eta Carinae might be a superstar. A number of astronomers now seem to agree on that, and it may be that Eta Carinae has a mass no less than 200 times that of the Sun. Its luminosity may be 5,000,000 times that of the Sun; that is, 10½ times that of S Doradus, or equal to both Plaskett Twins put together.

Eta Carinae is losing mass. In my earlier essay I took this to be a sign that it was pre-supernova, but superstars always lose mass in the form of a good, brisk stellar wind. That helps keep them relatively stable. The

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fact that Eta Carinae's stellar wind contains nitrogen and oxygen, which again I took as a pre-nova sign, may only signify that superstars undergo strong inner turbulence, which may again serve to keep them stable.

The stellar wind may mean an annual loss to Eta Carinae of something like one full Solar mass in a hundred years. If that were to continue unchanged, Eta Carinae would be entirely gone in 20,000 years, but, of course, it won't be. As Eta Carinae loses mass and drifts out of its superstar status, its stellar wind is bound to decrease in volume. It may be that superstars, through their active stellar wind, slowly lose their hydrogen-rich envelope and become naked star-centers that are primarily helium. These are called "Wolf-Rayet stars."

Another superstar in our own Galaxy is thought to be one called "P Cygni." It is much like Eta Carinae but smaller. Its mass is about half that of Eta Carinae and is perhaps nearly 100 times the mass of our Sun. It is only about a third as luminous as Eta Carinae, but that still makes it about 1,500,000 times as luminous as the Sun and over 3 times as luminous as S Doradus.

But what is the most luminous superstar known? Well, back to the Great Magellanic Cloud.

Within the cloud is a gaseous nebula something like the Great Orion Nebula in our own Galaxy. The nebula in the Clouds is vastly greater, however. It covers an area of about 3000 parsecs by 1000 parsecs and is the brightest object in the Great Magellanic Cloud. It can even be seen with the unaided eye. It is larger than any nebula in our own Galaxy, or, in fact, any that we can make out in a galaxy close enough to us to have visible detail. It is called "The Tarantula Nebula" because its shape reminded some observers of a spider.

The Tarantula Nebula seems to contain a number of Wolf-Rayet stars, which may be the descendants of a whole group of superstars. The Nebula may, at least in part, be the product of the blown-off outer portions of those superstars.

Some people think that almost all the luminosity and ionization of the Tarantula Nebula now comes from a central area no more than a tenth of a parsec across. The area may contain several stars, but in 1981, one group of astronomers became convinced that it was the site of a single superstar, the most luminous we may have detected up to this point. This superstar is called "R136a."

R136a may have a mass that is possibly 2,000 times that of the Sun. In

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mass, the sun is to R136a as the planet Mercury would be to a planet somewhat larger than Saturn. That makes our Sun look like a pipsqueak indeed, but don't let that offend your Solar chauvinism. Superstars make space unlivable for light-years about themselves, and what's so great about that?

R136a may be about 60,000,000 times as luminous as the Sun, which would make it 40 times as luminous as Eta Carinae. Its surface temperature may be as high as 60,000°K.

If Earth were circling R136a, it would have to do so at a distance of 1/26 of a parsec (⅛ of a light-year) to reduce the apparent radiation level to that of our own Sun, and even then we would have to live underground to avoid the hard radiation.

What it amounts to then, is that we are now aware of a class of remarkable stars whose existence was not dreamed of as little as 15 years ago and whose existence was, in fact, considered to be impossible. If we can now study such stars in detail, we may learn a great deal about stellar astrophysics that can then be applied to more ordinary stars, including our own delightful pipsqueak.

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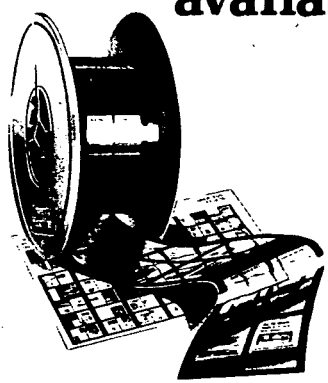

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Scott Baker's first story for F&SF concerns the search for an alien race that has come to Earth in a golden starship and then apparently and mysteriously vanished . . .

Sea Change

BY
SCOTT BAKER

The bathtub was a deep oval seashell of green-veined white marble. The broad end of the shell extended upward like the headrest of a bed, with two ornate brass faucets supposedly resembling dolphins — though they reminded Rob more of tadpoles — set into the carved stone. The Tla who had been living in what was now their house had been found dead and dissolving in the tub, and though Rob's mother had been assured that nothing of either the Tla or whatever might have killed it could possibly have filtered through the monomolecular protective film to contaminate anything, she had still spent most of her first day in their new house scrubbing and rescrubbing the bathroom. Her efforts had made no difference whatsoever that Rob could see, but when she'd finally been satisfied she'd ordered him into the tub, and from then on he'd had to take two baths a day, one before school and the other before bed, instead of the single before-bed bath that had satisfied her in Arizona. Venice felt filthy to her, with its heavy air and sky, its dirt and discoloration sealed to the statues and walls beneath the Tla's impenetrable protective film, yet looking as though it would come away in your hand if you so much as brushed it.

He could hear his parents fighting in the kitchen downstairs, but they were keeping their voices too low for him to make out what they were saying. He listened a moment longer, then let himself slide down in the tub with his neck back so that just his ears were under water.

"Are you there?" he whispered. "Please let me see you. Show me what you look like." But the voices

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were distant, indistinct; all he could really hear was the sloshing of the tub water.

He sat back up. It was getting late, he should already have been ready for school, but he didn't want to face his mother and father, see the way they were hurting each other, or have them turn their anger against him. Besides, even before he'd begun hearing the voices whispering to him from the water, he'd discovered to his astonishment that he actually liked the time he spent sitting alone in the warm, soapy water. He'd always enjoyed swimming but hated baths before, yet he loved lying back with his head resting between the dolphin taps and looking out over the shiny black marble floor and through the big window that gave on the geranium-choked walled garden in front of the house and the equally geranium-filled Rio degli Ognassanti visible through the garden gate's wrought-iron grillwork. Only the almost imperceptible undulation of the mass of pinkish red flowers and dull green leaves and stems ever betrayed the fact that the geraniums were floating, like the tangled raft of seaweed the Tla's genetic manipulation had made of them, a flooded garden, and that the Rio degli Ognassanti was not an overgrown flowered alleyway, but a canal.

A bedraggled seagull was waddling pompously around on the water-stained marble statue of a woman with half-melted features whose torso jutted from the geraniums. Rob watched the seagull absently as it hopped down from the flower-mass and started poking through the stems and leaves, trying to think of something he could do to make things right between his mother and father again.

They were always fighting about him. He loved them and they loved him, but it would have been better for them if they'd never had him. Then they wouldn't have had to fight all the time and they could have just been happy together.

After a moment the gull gave up and took flight, only to strike the invisible walkway overhead with an indignant squawk. It recovered and flew away, disappearing up over the house. Probably looking for a boat to follow for scraps, or at least some open water with fish it could eat. There were only a few hundred people in Venice now, not nearly enough to provide the garbage that had once fed over half a million pigeons and gulls, and the geraniums had choked not only the canals and the lagoon separating Venice proper from the Lido but had extended out for hundreds of meters into the sea around them. Yet for reasons nobody had been able to explain, they showed no signs of spreading any farther despite the fact that some of the neighboring islands were actually closer than Venice was to the Lido.

"Why *can't* he keep on going to

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school here?" Rob's father was almost yelling.

"Because he's all alone here! There isn't anyone else his age!" They were so angry they'd forgotten again that he could hear what they were saying.

He stood up carefully, stepped out of the tub, and eased the bathroom door open so he could hear them better, then got back in the water.

"He'll get more individual attention here." His father's voice was still loud, but there was a conciliatory, almost pleading note in it. "And there'll be some kids coming in with the new people when the Palace housing is ready."

"One or two more kids won't make any difference."

"Let him finish out the year. Then we'll ask him. If he wants to leave, we'll send him away to school. If not, he can stay. O.K.?"

Rob's mother didn't answer at first. Rob was starting to relax when suddenly she said, "No, it's not O.K.! This city isn't right for a child."

"Why not?"

"It isn't safe."

"Safe? With no pollution, no violence, no cars to run him over? This is the safest city in the world. Unless you're talking about those two bomb scares. That was just an isolated crazy, they caught him before he hurt anyone."

"You know that's not what I'm talking about. Maybe there's something living in the canals. Under the geraniums. Maybe that's what killed the Tla."

"That's crazy. Ridiculous. It was the water. Like what the sweat on Rob's hand did to Sth'liat."

"What if Rob had been the one with the acid burns?"

"Sarah — "

"You're such an expert, you know all about the Tla, everything important, like that we're all perfectly safe. Only you didn't know it would burn one to have Rob touch it. Rob could have been burned just as easily."

"Nothing happened to Rob."

"You don't know what they came to Earth for. You don't know why they left the desert for a sinking city if water's so deadly to them. You don't know why they committed suicide, if that's what it really was, or what they wanted the geraniums for. But the one thing you do know is that we're all perfectly safe, no matter what."

"We know what the geraniums are for. They filter the pollution out of the water."

"That's why they glow at night?"

"No, but —"

"And why were they so interested in cleaning up the water if it would kill them to touch it? When they didn't even scrape the pigeon shit off the statues?"

"I don't know. You know I don't know. That's what we're all here for, to find out why they did what they did."

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"That's what you're here for. Not me. Not Rob. It took me six years to get my gallery to where it was starting to pay for itself, then you dragged me here. For what? So we can all waste a couple of years and then start all over again?"

"Aren't you even curious to find out what they were like, what happened to them?"

"Not anymore. Not when I think of Rob growing up in this mausoleum with just you and your friends for company."

Rob's father said something too low for Rob to hear, and his mother replied in the same tone. They'd remembered he was there. He jumped out of the tub and left it to drain while he scrambled into his clothes. He had his shirt almost buttoned by the time his father yelled, "Rob, school! Hurry up!" in a hearty voice with only a little edge to it to show how angry and irritated he really was.

His mother caught him as he ran toward the living room window and sent him back to comb his hair.

"Don't run," she told him when she handed him his grope stick. "I don't want you falling."

"I'll be careful, Mother." He tried to think of something he could say to reassure her, let her know she wouldn't have to leave Father or send him away to keep him safe. But there wasn't any way to reassure her, not without telling her about the voices, and he wasn't ready to let anyone know that the Tla were still there. Not yet, not until he'd learned enough so that when he told everybody about them they wouldn't have any choice but to believe him even if he was only eleven years old. Then his mother would finally understand and not be afraid for him or herself anymore.

I have to do it soon, he realized as he pecked her on the cheek and climbed the makeshift wooden stairs his father still hadn't gotten around to painting. He stepped out through the living room window onto the walkway, feeling for it with his grope stick. I have to do it before they take me away from here or break up for good.

It would have been so much easier if the Tla had still been the way Sth'liat had been back in Arizona, all slow and thoughtful. But they were tiny now, or so they'd told him. After centuries of old age and decline, they were young again — and though they whispered their joy to him through the water, they were too busy sporting among the geraniums and beneath the city for anything else to matter to them.

Rob remembered the first time he'd seen Sth'liat, seven years ago, in Arizona. The Tla had been ugly, with loose folds of pebbly, lizardlike gray skin over bones that stuck out and bent at all the wrong angles — but with his huge liquid gold-brown eyes and mournful, droopy face, he'd reminded Rob of the basset hound they'd had back home; and when Sth'liat

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spoke to Rob, he had sounded just like Rob's grandfather after his stroke: old and frail, fading away, barely able to talk but so happy to see Rob. . . . In Sth'liat's low, halting voice, Rob had heard the same inarticulate joy, the same gladness to see Rob that he'd always heard in his grandfather's, and he'd felt the same uprushing of love for the alien as he had for the old man. That had been why he'd taken Sth'liat's clawlike hand, because his grandfather had always wanted to hold Rob's hands and look into his face after he got too weak to have Rob climb into his lap anymore.

Sth'liat had watched Rob approaching, he must have known what was going to happen, but he'd done nothing to stop it. Rob could remember how horrible it had been, the way Sth'liat's hand had smoked and run where he'd touched it, like burning wax. Rob's mother had run up and grabbed him, held him and rocked him back and forth, too frightened and furious to know what else to do. She had never really forgiven either her husband or the Tla for what had happened, though Rob had only been frightened and Sth'liat himself had not seemed angry despite the damage done to his hand. In the same slow, grave voice he always used, he'd said that the young were always curious and playful, and that he was sure that Rob had meant no harm.

I don't even know what they look like now. How can I tell people they're still alive when I can't even tell anyone what they look like? They'd think I was making it up.

"Something wrong, Rob?" his mother asked. He realized he'd stopped just outside the window and was gazing down at the statue without seeing it.

"Nothing, Mother." He turned back, tried to smile at her. "I was just thinking."

"You better hurry up. You're late enough as it is. Just don't run."

"I promise."

The walkway sloped gently up from the windowsill, over the statue and around a dead pine tree that would undoubtedly have fallen on the house if the Tla had not fixed it in place for all time, up over the garden wall and across the Rio degli Ognassanti, then down the Rio delle Ermite. Usually the dust and dead leaves and the like made the walkways visible if you knew what to look for, but last night's rain had washed them clean again and they meandered unpredictably — more like game trails than even the least geometric sidewalks or city streets — so that though Rob knew the way by heart, he still had to tap in front of himself with the stick to keep from falling off.

Three mangy-looking wild cats were lying so as to form an equilateral triangle apparently suspended in mid-air over the Rio della Toletta. They were all facing inward, staring fixedly at an empty point at the center of the

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triangle. They seemed to be ignoring one another, but when one cat moved slightly the other two shifted so as to maintain their relative position, though their gazes never left the triangle's empty center.

Rob paused to watch them an instant before hurrying on, wondering if they were actually looking at something he couldn't see — perhaps even the Tla, as invisible as their walkways — or were just engaging in some typical cat strangeness.

When the walkway joined the main route over the Grand Canal, Rob caught sight of the Tla's nacreous golden cone-shell-shaped starship towering over the city. It was in the Piazza San Marco and twice the height of the Campanile beside it, yet seemed somehow perfectly integrated into the architectural excesses of the city's skyline.

School was in the Ducal Palace, but Rob paused before he went in to look back over his shoulder again at the starship, poised in the center of the flooded and geranium-filled piazza with the dilated entrance port at the base of the cone fixed open by the film in the same way that its controls, though visible, were fixed immovably in place; the scientists studying them could look at them all they wanted but were unable to alter any of their settings. The project had built a barrier around the ship to try to keep the water out, but it was impossible to affix anything to the piazza's film-coated pavement, so the enclosure leaked and, despite the pumps working full-time to get rid of the water that seeped through, the ship was always awash in at least enough water to get your feet wet. Someone Rob didn't recognize in a black shirt — probably a dayworker over from Maestra — was cutting back the geraniums that had overgrown the barrier during the night and were threatening to invade the ship's interior, while a U.N. guard watched him suspiciously.

The doors to the Ducal Palace, like the starship's entrance, had been left permanently open, and the ground floor was flooded. The project had laid down a wooden floor a meter above the original floor and blocked the doorways as well as possible, but the first story remained too humid for anything but the pumps, generators, and other machinery necessary for the apartments being constructed on the upper floors.

Rob showed his ID at the door. The guard waved him through without checking it. Supposedly everybody, even the senior scientists like his father, had to have their identities verified constantly, but that applied only to adults. He climbed a winding staircase with red plastic pipes containing electric cables on his right, green plastic pipes carrying water on his left, to his classroom.

The room itself was small, with some water-stained mosaics on one wall. Probably a former cloakroom or

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something like that. His friend Mike was back in Minneapolis again, so there were only Dominique and himself, plus a few younger kids he never paid any attention to.

Rob sat down at his terminal and touched his thumb to the screen to identify himself, then checked the menu. His only remaining requirements for the week were some more work on his French or Italian, and a study of the political and religious upheaval that had followed the '89 newflu epidemic in the U.S. and Canada. He'd already run through the rest of the week's lessons.

He chose the epidemic. He was bad in languages and didn't want to look foolish in front of Dominique. It was better when Mike was there, because Mike was even worse than he was.

He tried to concentrate and not think about having to leave the city, or about his parents breaking up. If he didn't do well, his mother would have one more argument to use on his father.

It was a relief when the teacher called him over to his booth to see how well Rob was synthesizing what he'd studied today with the rest of what he'd learned that week.

The sky had clouded over again by lunchtime. Rob waited for Dominique outside the Palace. They didn't get along particularly well — even though she was only a little over a year older, she usually acted as though being twelve meant she was an adult and he was just a little kid — but if he could make better friends with her, then maybe his mother wouldn't worry so much.

Actually, his mother was right, or would have been right if it hadn't been for the Tla. Mike was his only real friend here, and he spent a week every month back in the states. Though Rob had loved the city from the first day he'd seen it with the sun gleaming on its palaces and cathedrals and on the Tla's golden starship, he'd been almost unbearably lonely until he'd begun hearing voices.

"Hi, Dominique."

"Hello, Rob." Dominique sounded bored, as usual.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Rob asked, not knowing what else to say. He gestured at the starship. One of his father's colleagues who was studying the entrance mechanism saw him and waved back, making him feel momentarily foolish. "The way it fits in with the basilica and everything else, I mean. Maybe that's why they came here."

"You sound just like your father." Dominique started off, pushing her grope stick in front of her. Rob hurried to catch up with her.

"What's wrong with sounding like my father?"

"You both love it here so much. I hate it."

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"Hate it?" It had never occurred to him that anyone who wasn't afraid of the city the way his mother was could hate Venice. "Why?"

"Because there's nothing to do, nobody to talk to. You can't even go swimming because of the weeds. It rains all the time. It's like being stuck out in the country all the time, only worse."

"My mother doesn't like it, either."

"I know. You're lucky she's sending you away. I keep trying to get my parents to send me back to Montreal, but they won't do it."

"What do you mean, sending me away? I'm not going anywhere."

"Your mother asked mine about schools in Switzerland, that's how I know."

"They're not sending me anywhere! I mean, they're talking about it for next year, but nothing's been decided yet."

"Your mother's decided."

"Maybe, but Father hasn't. He won't let her."

Dominique looked at him in disgust. "You get to leave and you don't even want to. It's not fair."

"No, it isn't."

The cats were still staring at the same empty point over the Rio della Toletta when Rob passed them.

Maybe the whole trouble was, his mother was bored. She didn't have anything to do but worry and feel alone.

She was upstairs when he got home, in one of the bedrooms they didn't sleep in. She had her easel set up with a canvas on it and all her oils out and ready, but there were only two or three dispirited brushstrokes in one corner. She was sitting on a wooden chair, looking out at the gray sky and smoking.

"What are you doing home, Rob? I thought you were eating with your father at the canteen again."

"I was going to, but then I thought I'd like to come home and see you."

"Do you want a sandwich?"

"Sure." He followed her back downstairs to the kitchen, sat down and watched as she got the food out, sliced the bread, ham, provolone, and tomatoes.

"It's not because you heard us fighting this morning?"

"No." He felt uncomfortable, tried not to let it show. "It's just that — I don't see you enough. So I thought I'd come home for lunch more often. If that's O.K."

"Whenever you want, Rob. Mustard or mayonnaise?"

"Mayonnaise."

She gave him the sandwich, sat down across from him with a cup of coffee. She looked old, tired. He wondered if they'd gone back to fighting after he'd left.

The bread was chewy and tough; he had to tear bites off with his teeth, and a slice of tomato fell out onto the table. He picked it up and put it back in the sandwich, tried to be more

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careful with the next bite.

"Do you want to go for a walk after school?" he asked. "I mean, if it gets nicer out?" He could see her frowning, getting ready to say no, so he added quickly, "It's beautiful here when the sun's shining. I found some really great places for you to paint."

"No, thank you, Rob. I used to like it here, before you were born. Even though it was rotting and sinking and falling apart, there were still people living in it, it was all still alive. But not anymore."

"I still think it's beautiful, Mother." Maybe if he could get some of the way it looked to him across to her—

"It's like it was a man-made city once, just dead like a parking lot or something, but now it's come alive, it's part of nature again. Like a flower growing from a seed. Or — I don't know, I can't explain. But it's beautiful."

"I can't stand the silence. The geraniums all over everything. Like the city was going back to the jungle or something. It gives me the shivers, especially at night. . . ." She shook her head. "It's not natural here, Rob. It's not right."

He realized he should never have let her see how much he loved the city, how much it meant to him. She couldn't understand, and it would only worry her even more.

"Then how about taking me over to Maestra or Torcello?" he asked. "I haven't seen Torcello. Maybe you could find something you need in the market there, or paint that old church you and Dad were talking about, the one with the frescoes."

"All right." She forced a smile, and though he could see she was forcing it, there was still some real pleasure there as well. "As long as you're not just doing this to make me feel better."

"No. Maybe I'll ask Dominique to come along, if that's O.K.? I think she'd like that."

"All right." He could tell the idea pleased her. "Do you want another sandwich?"

"No, thanks."

"Then you better get back to school. I'll see you later."

It started to rain again a few minutes after he got back to the palace, and it was still raining when he finished school. He didn't even bother to ask Dominique if she wanted to go.

His mother was sitting in the upstairs bedroom again, looking out the window at the rain. He watched her a moment, but couldn't think of anything to say that would make any difference, so he put on a raincoat with a hood and went back outside. The rain didn't bother him the way it did her.

Why wouldn't the Tla show themselves to him? If he just knew what they looked like now and could describe them to someone else — Maybe that was why, because they didn't trust him to keep their secret? But they'd never told him not to tell anybody else about them. And then why let him hear them in the first place if

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they didn't trust him? Why did they keep on talking to him and not to anyone else? What made him so special?

His walk had taken him to the Fondamenta delle Zattere, out on the Punta della Dogana behind the Basilica of Santa Maria della Salute. Nobody could see him. He lay down on his belly by the water's edge, stuck his head in the geraniums, pushing them away with his hands until his mouth was almost touching the water underneath. "Show yourselves to me," he whispered. "Why won't you let me see what you look like?" But there was only the almost overpowering sweetness of the flowers' smell.

Dinner that night was grim. A fact-finding commission of representatives from some of the governments that had mounted the project had arrived unexpectedly, and its members were determined to find out why the project had not produced useful results after over a year. Rob's father was one of the senior scientists the commission had convoked for that evening to testify as to what they thought they had accomplished, and why they should be allowed to continue and not be replaced with some other team. Rob brought up his idea for a trip to Torcello as something the whole family could do together that Saturday or Sunday, but his father just nodded distractedly and said, "Maybe, Rob, if I've got the time," in a way that let Rob know there was no chance he ever would. The rain was coming down even harder than before, with lightning out over the sea, and thunder.

"I hope you can convince them," Rob's mother said as she helped his father into his plastic raincoat. "They couldn't do better with anyone else."

"Why? Isn't that what you want, too?"

"Not like that. Not because they forced you."

"Then you'd try to fight it?"

"No. That's not how I want to leave, but I still want to leave."

Rob's mother stood at the window, looking after his father for a moment as, seemingly suspended in midair above the garden and canal where the geraniums glowed with soft, shimmering whorls of green and gold phosphorescence, he tapped carefully in front of him with his grope stick like a blind man with his cane while he made his way slowly out over the garden wall and down the Rio delle Ermite.

In the bathtub that evening, looking out over the glowing garden, Rob tried to talk with the Tla, but, though Sth'liat and one or two of the others whose voices he could still recognize despite the change that had made them youthful again cried greetings to him, their voices were full of the storm's excitement and the beating of the waves and he couldn't get them to pay any attention to him.

Come play with us, they called to

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him, and when he whispered, "No, wait, please, I need to talk to you," they only laughed and told him, later, after the storm.

The next day he ate lunch in the canteen with his father, hoping to get a chance to tell him how much he loved the city, how important it was for him to be able to stay and not be sent away to school, but his father was too involved in the discussion he was having about the walkways and preservative film for Rob to talk to him privately. Rob tried to listen, since the more he knew about the problems they were trying to solve, the better he'd be able to get the answers for them when the Tla finally started telling him things, but the conversation was too technical, all about enzymes and isomers. He thought they were saying that the Tla had spun the walkways and protective film out of themselves, like spiders building their webs, but when he asked if that's what they meant, Mr. Mondolo told him that it was an interesting idea and one that might even be worth studying — with a smile that meant he was just trying to be nice to Rob — but that what they were talking about this time was something else entirely.

Just before he had to go back to school, the conversation turned to the Tla starship. Rob asked if he could go inside again for another look.

"No." His father shook his head. "I'm sorry, Rob. It's not like you could hurt anything, even if you wanted to, but they've tightened security again."

"They're not even sure they want to let *us* in anymore," Dominique's father said with a bark that was supposed to be a laugh but just sounded angry.

"Maybe in a couple of weeks, when the commission's gone again and everybody's had a little more time to forget that latest bombing attempt," Mr. Mondolo said, trying to be nice again, and everybody nodded.

Rob finally got his father alone the next evening, while his mother was cooking dinner.

"Dad — "

"What, Rob?"

"I heard you and Mother talking about sending me away to school next year."

"It would be sort of hard for you not to hear, the way we've been yelling at each other," his father said. "I'm sorry."

"That's O.K. I mean, that's not what I want to talk about. What I want to say is, I love it here, Dad. Everything. The geraniums, all of it. I don't want to leave here. Not ever. But I can't make Mother understand."

"Neither can I. I wish I could, but I can't. She just doesn't want to listen."

"Can you tell her for me anyway, Dad. Tell her to let me stay here? Please. She'll have to listen to you,

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even if she doesn't want to."

"I'll do what I can. But I'm having a pretty hard time keeping her from leaving, herself."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

Rob woke up in the middle of the night and heard them arguing again, but their bedroom was at the other end of the hall, and though he knew they were arguing about him again, he couldn't tell what they were saying. Only how angry they were, how much they hated each other.

It's because she's afraid of the city. Afraid of it for me. Because she doesn't understand it. Even Dad doesn't really understand it. If they understood, she wouldn't be afraid anymore. Then she'd see how beautiful it is here, how perfectly it all goes together now, and they wouldn't fight anymore.

The full moon was shining brightly in through the window, and when he sat up he could see the geraniums pulsing and glowing in the garden. The clock by the bed said it was a little after three in the morning. I can't wait any longer, he realized. Not if they're going to hate each other like that. He waited until the sounds of their fight had died away, then forced himself to wait another half hour by the clock to make sure they were asleep.

He put his pajamas on, and eased the bedroom door open, then sneaked down the hall. In their house in Arizona, the floor had creaked whenever he'd tried to sneak downstairs for cookies after he was supposed to be in bed, but the Tla's film had fixed this house's warped floorboards in place so that they were solid and his footsteps didn't make any noise.

He paused in front of his parents' door and heard his father snoring, the sound of his mother's regular breathing, so he knew he was safe. But even so, there would be too much chance of waking them up if he ran a tub, so he continued on past the bathroom and downstairs.

The living room window was open. It was a perfect night to talk to the Tla: warm, calm, bright, with nothing to distract them. He felt his way along the walkway on his hands and knees until he was just over the statue. He didn't want to get his pajamas wet, so he took them off and climbed down the statue till he was standing on its pedestal with his legs in the geraniums up to his knees and his ankles underwater.

He lay down on his stomach on the geraniums, feeling the springy mass swaying beneath him. He pushed them out of the way with his hands, put his head down by the water again the way he had on the Punta della Dogana, whispered, "Are you there? Can you hear me?" Then he closed his eyes and stuck his head underwater so he could hear their answer.

We can hear you, Rob, he heard Sth'liat say.

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He lifted his head back up out of the water. "You have to help me," he whispered. "I need your help."

Why? One of the Tla asked him when he stuck his head back under again. What's wrong?

"My parents," he told them. "They're going to send me away." He told them all about it, how his mother hated Venice, how she wanted to send him away to school.

You can come back and see us later, they told him when he put his head in the water again, already losing interest. We'll still be here. We'll be here. We'll be here until we grow up again. You'll have plenty of time to come back and play with us then.

"Is that why you talk to me and not to the others? Because I'm just a kid like you now?"

Because you wanted to be my friend, Sth'liat said. And the others are too old for us. We won't be that old again for hundreds of years.

"But if I go away, I'll get too old for you!"

Then come play with us now, Sth'liat told him. Leave your old body and come swim with us. That way you won't have to get old before we do.

"I can't do that."

You can if you want to. We'll help you.

"Can I just leave my body for a little while, an hour or two, and then come back to it?"

No. You'll have to wait until your new body grows up again.

"I can't. I'm just a kid. Mother and Father'd miss me."

Then come back to us later, when you can. We'll still be here waiting for you.

"Show yourselves to me. Please, let me see what you look like."

Put your head in the water again and open your eyes.

He wedged his head as far as he could into the geraniums, opened his eyes. The salt water stung. All he could see was the geraniums' pulsating phosphorescence.

He held his breath until, suddenly, he heard their laughter and saw a quick, darting spark of light, and then another. Like fireflies. Underwater fireflies.

A third spark joined them, and a fourth. Then, as suddenly as they had come, they were gone.

"Sth'liat?" he asked. But there was no answer. He got to his feet, climbed the statue back to the walkway, sneaked back to his room.

They'll never believe me, he realized the next day as school was getting out. The fireflies are too different. Even if I can show the fireflies to them, nobody'll ever believe that those are really the Tla.

They're little kids. Too little. Babies. They won't ever tell me the kind of thing I need to convince people that they're really here talking to me.

He wandered around until it

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started getting dark, using his grope stick to follow the walkways' twistings and turnings with automatic skill. It was only when he finally took the way back to his house and, looking in through the living room window, saw his parents sitting stiffly across from each other, glaring as though they'd been fighting yet again, that he at last realized what he'd been doing had been saying good-bye to the city.

The Tla had been so beautiful, darting through the water. So free and joyous.

"Where were you?" his mother said when he reached the window. "We were worried about you."

"Out. Just walking around."

"Well, don't. Not without telling us."

He looked at them, the fear and anger on his mother's face, the anger and frustration on his father's, and thought: The sooner I tell them I want to go away to school, the better. When they don't have me around to worry about, they won't have to hate each other anymore.

"Mother, I —"

"What, Rob?"

"Nothing." He couldn't say it. I'll tell them tomorrow, he decided. At breakfast. I'll sneak out tonight after they're asleep to watch the Tla again and tell them tomorrow.

"Then sit down," his father said. "We've got something to tell you."

Rob sat down on the couch.

"We've decided that you've got to go away to school," his father said. "Your mother's been checking out boarding schools for you, but we didn't want to say anything until we were sure. She's found a school in Switzerland that looks perfect, except that you're a little weak in languages for them. So you'll be starting intensive summer school courses in two weeks to give you a chance to catch up with the other students there."

"But you told me —"

"I know, Rob." His father couldn't meet his eyes. "But I didn't want to make you unhappy. I wanted you to enjoy the rest of your time here."

"When? When did you decide?"

"Last week," his mother said.

"The morning I heard you fighting before school?" he asked his father.

"Yes."

"You lied to me! You promised you'd help me stay!"

"I promised your mother I wouldn't tell you anything first." He shrugged. "I'm sorry, Rob, but that's how it has to be. You'll understand better when you're older."

Everything he'd tried to do for them, all the ways he'd been willing to give up everything he wanted to make them happy, and they'd been lying to him, they'd already decided to send him away. Suddenly he wasn't willing to sacrifice anything for them anymore. They had to let him stay. He had to make them let him stay.

"The Tla," he said. "They're still here."

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"What?" his mother asked.

"What do you mean?" his father demanded.

"They're still alive. They didn't die. They talk to me. That's why you can't send me away: you need me here, to talk to them for you."

His mother looked horrified. She opened her mouth to say something, but his father glanced over at her, shook his head slightly, and she closed her mouth again.

"You don't believe me. You think I'm making it all up!"

"We found their bodies, Rob. You saw the photographs," his father said, gently now. "I'm sorry they're dead, I wish they weren't as much as you do, but that doesn't change the facts. They're dead, Rob."

"Those were just their — like their cocoons. They're different now. Young again."

"I don't want to hear this," his mother said.

"No, wait. What are they like now, Rob?"

"They're tiny. They were too old, but when they get too old they don't die, they just turn back into children."

"Can you show them to us, Rob?" his father asked.

Rob turned to the open window. The garden was just beginning to glow faintly in the deepening twilight. "Show yourselves!" he yelled to the Tla. "Please show yourselves to them. Just this one time. Or they'll make me go away."

"Rob—" his father began.

"Please!" he shouted.

And then, suddenly, there among the pulsing swirls of phosphorescence in the garden, he saw brighter sparks, like dozens of fireflies darting around in the geraniums.

"They can't see you!" he yelled. "Make them see you."

The sparks darted faster, and some came leaping out of the geraniums to dance in the air, shining and beautiful, for an instant before falling back.

"There! Did you see them?"

"See what?"

"Those sparks, in the garden, the ones that looked like fireflies."

"That's all they were, Rob. Fireflies," his father said in that same horrible, gentle, pitying tone of voice that was worse than any anger could have been. "And your mother's right. This city isn't right for you. But we can't wait until next fall to send you away."

"I'll get us plane tickets for Monday," his mother said. "We can go pack and stay with Mother until we figure out something better. Maybe she'll be able to find us a good doctor."

"I don't need a doctor. I'm not sick." He wanted to yell it at them, but he was too tired, it was too hopeless, there wasn't any reason to keep on talking to them. They couldn't understand. They could never understand.

That's why the Tla talked to me

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and not to anybody else, he realized. Because I'm not like the rest of them. Because I could believe in them.

"Go up and take your bath," his mother told him. "I'll come see you when you're ready for bed."

She was treating him like he was six years old again. That's how it was going to be from now on. They'd be watching over him all the time, listening to everything he said to see if he was crazy.

It would be better to go with the Tla, he realized as he turned the water on and started to get undressed. Swim free of his body and play with them in the sinking city for hundreds of years until they were ready to grow up again.

But what if he did go with the Tla? His mother and father would find his old body in the bathtub. Would they realize what had happened, decide the Tla were dangerous after all, maybe decide to destroy the whole city?

But then he realized, no, they'll just think I had an accident, or that I was crazy and drowned myself trying to pretend I was like the Tla. They'll be sad for a while, but they won't have to fight over me anymore, and so they'll be happy together again. Later on, when I'm more grown up, I'll find a way to tell them what really happened, and then they'll understand.

"Sth'liat," he called as he got into the tub. "Sth'liat, I'm ready. Ready to come play with you."

He heard their answering chorus as he slipped beneath the water. Open the drain so we can come to you, Sth'liat told him, and then they were all around him, dancing through the water like tiny burning minnows. He blew all the air out of his lungs, then breathed in and swallowed. He coughed and choked and sneezed until he couldn't bear it anymore and his body took over and pushed his head up out of the water to gasp for air. But the Tla were still there, darting around him, calling encouragement to him, and he tried again, pushing his head down so violently that he hit it against the marble and half-stunned himself. This time when the water rushed into his nose and throat, he was too confused, to fight his will, and when he gasped for air he only sucked in more water. The pain in his chest was unbearable, he was drowning, he couldn't find the surface even though it was only centimeters away, and then suddenly, as his body gave a last, violent sneeze, he could breathe again, and he was tiny, like the plastic skin diver he'd had when he was little that you filled with baking soda to make it go underwater, only even tinier than the skin diver had been as he was sneezed violently out of his old body's left nostril. He felt a moment's total disorientation, but the Tla were all around him, dancing with him, joyous and welcoming — and now that he

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was the same size that they were, he could see that they didn't look like minnows or fireflies at all, but almost like tiny angels or even the fairies he'd seen in books, only with shimmering iridescent veils that rippled around them instead of true wings.

I'm like them, now he realized with wonder, recognizing the strange sensation that had so confused him as the feel of his own veil-wings. He rippled them, delighting as they caught the water, propelled him into the Tla's daring dance, faster and faster, so that when at last the sound of the bathroom door opening came to him as a low rumble through the waters, he was only a bright spark vanishing down the drain.

A COMETARY RAG

First, the fever showed in our TV ads: Soft
toilet paper unrolling into a spuming tail.
A fresh logo for an old cleanser. Soon,
Detroit resurrected a long dead make. "Rock
Around the Clock" played constantly. Jules
Verne reprints. Next, a new pitch: Halley's
Hog — dot matrix print at 400 cps. Johnny
Storm changed his name in the Fantastic Four.
Subtle alterations in Brazil's flag. Even a
fanzine out of Kitt Peak Observatory. Then,
unpredictable signs: The Union of
Prophets and Doomsayers — 5 locals in NYC
alone. A full ceasefire in Central America.
Close-ups from the Giotto fly-by showed the
20km head to be a derelict alien starship.
After all this they finally exhumed poor
Edmund's grave and found a small silver tube
with a copy of a note to Sir Isaac: "When
will all this madness stop?" Scholars poured
through museum papers in London for Newton's
reply. As yet, no answer has been found.

—ROBERT FRAZIER

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F&SF Competition

REPORT ON COMPETITION 39

In the November issue, we asked you to complete the following sentence: "You know you've *really* landed in an alternate universe when you discover that . . ."

The two most frequent repeats were: ". . .Robert A. Heinlein is President of the United States." And, ". . .Ronald Reagan is President of the U.S." Special mention to Barry Malzberg for: ". . .Billy Martin is/is not managing the New York Yankees."

Overall, a very fine response. And now the winners. You know you've *really* landed in an alternate universe when you discover that . . .

FIRST PRIZE

. . .They finally got all the scrolls in the Library at Alexandria on microfiche.

. . .Harlan Ellison and Lazarus Long run the top ad agency on Madison Ave.

. . .The new brand of shampoo really *does* bring out the highlights in your fur, and leaves your tail fluffy and manageable.

. . .the coins in your sporran say 'In Mithras We Trust'

. . .The main story in the news today is that superpower AIR (Arab-Israeli Republic), in an obvious move to counter Japan's coup in the manned Mars mission, is dramatically increasing aid to war-torn Washington, D.C., where Yankee and Confederate forces are still ignoring the UN cease fire. And from across the Mississippi border, Alphonso Begay, Foreign Affairs Chief of the Iroquois Nations, warned again that any guerrillas from either side caught on the West Bank would be dealt with 'harshly.'

Miki Magyar
Boulder, CO

SECOND PRIZE

. . .the first person to set foot on the moon was named Alice Kramden.

. . .MacDonald's has been the world leader in the field of rapid-turn-around custom semiconductor fabrication for the past decade — the mainstay of their product line being a serial memory chip called "the Big Stack."

. . .Arnold Schwarzenegger has just been cast as the lead in *The Wally Cox Story*.

. . .Buster Brown's faithful dog is named Cujo.

—Robert Stacy
Danbury, CT

RUNNERS UP

. . .your cat wants to borrow the car.

. . .your ivy has apologized to you for being late with the rent.

. . .there's a picture of you and your pet on the cover of F&SF.

—Stan Lee
Los Angeles, CA

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. . .things that can go wrong, don't.

. . .the listing in the Yellow Pages for Thaumaturgy is marked "Advertisers at this heading are required by law to be licensed."

. . .the check really *is* in the mail.

—Mark Bernstein
Ypsilanti, MI

. . .Smokey the Bear is in prison for arson.

. . .Yog-Sothoth is premiering with the New York City Ballet.

. . .Valley Girl is like the *official* language of the country, you melvin.

—Michael J. Emery
Knoxville, TN

. . .the anchorman on the Six o'Clock News is Rod Serling.

. . .your life insurance policy is written by Conan the Actuarian.

. . .you drop your bread and it lands jelly side up.

—Augustine Funnell
Fredericton, Canada

. . .old-time fans are sitting around reminiscing about the big splash THE LAST DANGEROUS VISIONS made when it was published fifteen years ago.*

. . .when you come out of the theater discussing the existential nuances of the latest Steven Spielberg film and Sylvester Stallone tries to panhandle some change from you, your date, Kelly LeBrock, tells him to piss off.

**similarly from many others*

—Harlan Ellison
Sherman Oaks, CA

COMPETITION 40 (suggested by Miki Magyar)

Fads are fantasy in action, on the mass level. Who could have predicted hula hoops or skateboards? What will be the hot items in 1990? For example: a revival of the bustle; gourmet hard-boiled eggs; the cult hit musical "Bonzo Goes to Washington;" etc. Limit of ten, the more outrageous the better.

Rules: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Entries must be received by March 15. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

Prizes: First prize, eight different hard cover science fiction books. Second prize, 20 different sf paperbacks, Runners-up will receive one-year subscription to F&SF. Results of Competition 40 will appear in the July Issue.

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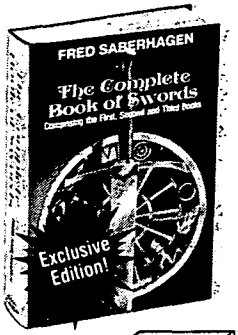

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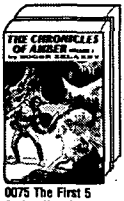

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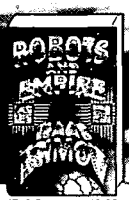

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